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# **THEOLOGY FROM THE DRAVIDIAN SOIL**

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**Edited by  
Sebastian Painadath**

# **JEEVADHARA**

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# jeevadhara

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

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## Theology from The Dravidian Soil

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## Editorial

Theology is the pursuit of the divine Logos: human mind explores the presence of the Word of God in scriptures ; human heart searches the power of the Spirit of God in the lives of peoples. The existential life of the people is the basic *locus theologicus*. The theologian enquires how God is at work in the struggles and aspirations of the people, how the divine creativity is latent in the creative forms of the culture of the people. A function of theology is to make manifest the latent divine dynamics of a culture.

Faith offers light for this process. Faith is the trust one has in the power and presence of the Divine in the world. This experience is communicated through diverse symbols. For us Christians, entry to the experience of the universal immanence of the Divine is offered through the person and event of Jesus Christ. A theological reading of the history of a people, a faith-based interpretation of the divine dynamics of the culture of a people, need not be a sectarian project. A Christian reading of history is not the same as a *churchy* reading. An understanding of history in the light of Christ would mean that one explores how the dynamics of the *Reign of God*, proclaimed by Jesus Christ, is at work in the historical evolution of a people: how the Spirit of God shapes the life of a people into the Reign of God; how the values of the Reign of God are operative in the culture of a region.

Such an open theological exploration is attempted in this number of *Jeevadhara*. The concern is to enquire how the values of the Reign of God are at work in the Dravidian culture of South India.

Dravidians are a racial group that lived in India before the entry of Aryans between 1800 and 1200 BCE. They had developed a high civilization, the remnants of which are found in Harappa and Mohanjedaro in the Indus valley. With the coming of the Aryans the Dravidians moved to South India and developed their specific social structures, religious symbols, language and literature, art and

architecture. Today they live in the four states of South India, each having its own Dravidian language: Andhra with Telugu, Karnataka with Kannada, Kerala with Malayalam and Tamil Nadu with Tamil. The Dravidian mentality had been basically that of human equality and consequently there had been an ethos of egalitarianism. But with the Aryan *varna* system making its inroads a strong caste feeling evolved in the Dravidian circles. However there have been in South India individuals and groups initiating protest movements reacting strongly to caste system on religious and social grounds. In such *prophetic movements* the power and presence of the divine Spirit can be discovered. Those who have contributed to this number of *Jeevadhara* explore this theonomous dimension of the Dravidian people.

In each article the life and thought of the social reformer is presented first. Then an exploration is made as to how he critically responded to the oppressive elements of the caste-based structures and customs. The humanising values implied in this critique are described with appropriate citations from the writings of the social reformer. Finally a theological reflection is made to discover the dynamics of the Reign of God in this liberative movement. In the theological reflection no attempt is made to read Christian values *into* the works of the social reformer; the theologian with his faith-sensitivity rather discovers the values of the Reign of God proclaimed by Jesus already at work in the reform movement. Such a methodology of contextualised theological reflection opens up wide horizons for the growth of Christian theology in Asia beyond the boundaries of the traditional Christian Churches. This theological method, rather than the product, is perhaps the specific contribution of this number of *Jeevadhara*. It gives an entry to an inter-religious hermeneutics in Asian theology.

These papers were presented at the South Indian Jesuit Regional Theologates Colloquium at Chennai in December 2001. In the light of the discussions the papers were revised for publication in *Jeevadhara*.



# **Vemana: All Humans are Equal**

**Kunduru Joji**

Vemana, the 8<sup>th</sup> century Telugu poet severely criticised the oppressive religious beliefs and myths, and the exploitative social structures and customs. He used a powerful popular language with penetrating imagery to unmask the alienating forces of the upper castes. Vemana took a secular critical attitude towards religions and upheld the spiritual values of freedom, tolerance and equality. In his world-view Kunduru Joji SJ discovers the basic values of the Reign of God. Joji teaches theology in various centers and seminaries.

## **1. Introduction**

Vemana, a poet of 18<sup>th</sup> century is the most popular poet of Telugu literature. He took the suffering and the cries of the subaltern people upon himself. He saw each wound inflicted upon the weak with a close look. He put his finger on every area of human life that was polluted and proposed a better way to live. The starting point for his analysis was the life experience of the people of his community and of himself. He reflects on the concrete experiences. In his methodology to enlighten the human community for a more human living, he shows, in unequivocal terms, how a theologian could be a man/woman of the people theologizing for people, in their midst and along with them.

## **2. Biography of Vemana**

As a poet, he was obsessed with the welfare of his community and never bothered to speak about himself. It is believed that Vemana was a native of Katarapalle, of Cuddapah district of A.P. Vemana called himself Vema or Vemana. The name does not denote a definite meaning. In Sanskrit 'Vema' signifies a 'loom' (a machine for weaving

yarn, handloom). 'Vemana' according to philosophical schools of Vedanta, can be considered a disciple of Vyasa who was called the Plato of India.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have drawn a chronological sketch of Vemana's life from a few references, in his verses.<sup>2</sup>

He comes from a farmer's family. He had a troubled early life. His mother died early of a sudden disease and he was treated badly by his step mother. His adolescent life too was a disoriented one. He did not settle down in his family occupation. He was a man disgusted with life. Even his married life was a failure. He remained bitter in life. But these bitter experiences made him to reflect more seriously on life.

### 3. The Context of the Society of Vemana

There are scores of verses which reflect the socio-economic, cultural and religious situations of Vemana's community of his time. These realities are very alarming. Poverty was manifested in the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Dependence of the weaker sections of people on the rich had become unavoidable. Caste practices were prevalent in every sphere of life. The division of labour and one's profession were determined purely on caste considerations. Immoral and unjust ways in the name of God and religion became the accepted ways. Social segregations were strictly observed. Women were treated as second class citizens and often even as mere objects. People's thinking and attitudes were marred by unhealthy beliefs, superstitions, signs and symbols. Reason seemed to have little relevance to them.

Vemana lived in a world where society was divided not only on economic basis but even on religious grounds. He witnessed violent tensions between sects and among groups. The so called priests and leaders had made matters worse for common man by imposing strict rules and regulations. On the political scenario there was chaos and anarchy in most of the kingdoms. Constant wars and in fights burdened the people with economic taxes. The governance by the inefficient, immoral, drunken and womanizing rulers disturbed the peaceful life of the people. The unscrupulous and greedy officials oppressed them. Merchants extracted both in cash and kind from the poor more than the latter could afford. Public wealth became the possession of officials and rulers. Vemana, as we see in his writings, makes a strong plea for liberation of the subaltern people.



### 3.1. Religious Context: Hinduism and Islam

As a child Vemana was brought up in a very upright religious atmosphere. But after the death of his parents the whole situation changed. As he grew into adulthood he became conscious of the rigidity and oppressive ways of the religion he was in. He became very critical about the life style and the religious practices in Hinduism in Telugu Desam (Andhra Pradesh). In fact it is Vemana's criticism that angered Hindu leaders who tried to destroy the writings of Vemana.

Islam was well spread far and wide in Andhra Pradesh in the time of Vemana. One of the reasons for the spread of Islam in South India and esp. in Andhra Pradesh was the failure of Hinduism in many aspects of life in society. Caste system and social life had made life burdensome to common man. In this context Islam created waves. It shook the roots of existing religious and social structures. The rigidity and loopholes of religious leaders were exposed. The low castes and the suffering people saw new hope in Islam. The promise of Islam that it would provide an equal society attracted many. Islam invited people from religious thinking to *rational* thinking. Muslim leaders dominated central offices. But the local and civil leaders remained as the representatives of the people. Vemana who was born a Hindu could not say much on the limitations of Islam. However, even Islam was not without limitations. Towards the end of his life Vemana had aversion to all religions. He wanted a religion that would strive for equality and justice among all human beings.

### 4. The Writings of Vemana

It was unfortunate that the writings of Vemana could not see the light of day until the Western scholars brought them to light. The French Abbe, J.A. Dubois, 1816, was the first one to be drawn to Vemana's writings. He makes two references to Vemana in his book *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*.<sup>3</sup> However, it was Charles Philip Brown,<sup>4</sup> who first collected, collated and edited some 693 verses from the palm leaf manuscripts of Vemana. Another Western scholar to write on Vemana was Charles E. Gover, who in his book *Folksongs of South India*, 1871, has devoted a whole section to Telugu, esp. to Vemana. W.H. Campbell, 1884, who spent 17 years in Rayalaseema, one of the three regions of Andhra Pradesh, visited Katarapalle, the birth place of Vemana and collaborated with M. Venkata Rathnam and Kandukuri Veeresalingam, the literary poets

of the day, in preparing a revised edition of C.P. Brown's Telugu-English Dictionary. He called Vemana, 'a real poet of the people'.<sup>5</sup> Dr.L.D.Barnett, another scholar, in his book, *The Heart of India*, says that Vemana was indifferent to nothing that degraded humans. He places Vemana in the front rank of the "teachers and preachers of mankind". At a time when the very name of Vemana was anathema to Telugu scholars, because the Telugu scholars silenced him by burying his writings, these Western scholars took keen interest in Vemana's writings, poetry, teaching, revelations and handed down a valuable treasure to the world at large and to the Telugus in particular.

#### 4.1. *Vemana and Native Poets*

The old saying that a prophet is better accepted outside his country (see Lk.4:24) than in his own, was true of Vemana. The Telugu poets have dismissed Vemana's writings as unworthy even of mention until so late as the 2<sup>nd</sup> decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century. There was deliberate silencing of Vemana by renowned Telugu poets like Gurazada Sreeramamurthy and Kandukuri Veereshalingam.<sup>6</sup> Vemana had become victim of caste against which he fought throughout his life. The high caste poets looked down upon the low castes with contempt. According to Appakavi, a brahmin, an authority on Telugu poetics, laid down the rule that the work of a sudra poet be rejected out of hand without examination<sup>7</sup>. Thus Vemana's writings suffered the animosity of the high caste. The height of the animosity was such that of 500 copies of the first edition of C. P. Brown's book on Vemana (see footnote no. 4) 450 copies had disappeared mysteriously and only 50 copies were presented to him as editor's copies<sup>8</sup>.

The reason for earning such treatment from the high castes was also the non-conformist attitude of Vemana. Vemana showed utter contempt for the old religious beliefs, myths and social structure, which in fact were contents of poems of the classical poets who were utterly out of touch with the degradation of the social order of the time. It is in this context that we should understand the hatred the classical poets had towards Vemana.

#### 4.2. *Vemana, an inspiration to present day reformists*

Dr. C. R. Reedy, poet, scholar and former V. C. of Andhra University, was the first one among the Telugu poets who proclaimed the richness of Vemana's contribution both to Telugu literature and to humanity. He considered Vemana, in his book on literary criticism, *Kavitva tatva vicaramu*, 1914 as one of the best and the most original



poets for his boldness of expression exposing pretensions. It was Dr. Reddy who broke, for the first time, the conspiracy of silence against Vemana. According to him, Vemana though not a learned man, was certainly a man of profound thought, of great reflective power and penetrating intuition into life and its secular and spiritual problems. His poetry was a spring, pure and undefiled, entirely spontaneous and original in thought and style. Once people have discovered who Vemana was and what his teaching was none could ignore him or avoid him. He remains even today a model of useful and relevant poetry. The today's intellectuals accept Vemana's writings as an inspiration towards the transformation of society. The social reformers and the extremist groups in particular who work for just society value Vemana's analysis of the society of his time as relevant even today.

### 5. Vemana's Life Style

Vemana who lived a very comfortable and easy life before his transformation was totally different later on. He was influenced very much by his sister-in-law after the death of his parents. It was she who in a way succeeded to turn him away from his adulterous and directionless life. Another person who had impact on Vemana was Mr. Abiramayya who used to live far away from community and a solitary life in the hills. Vemana used to visit him regularly. He enlightened him on being detached from everything in life. After the death of his brother and sister-in-law Vemana was thrown into utter poverty. Vexed with the ambiguities of human life he began to search for divine life. With the power of enlightenment he used to perform a few spiritual feats. In search of more of these powers he took to the life of a wanderer. He roamed about all over the country and preached wherever he went. As a sign of renunciation he took upon himself the style of nudity (*digambara*=clotheless). Thus we see Vemana in all pictures without clothes. Towards the end of his life he preferred the life of samadhi (laid himself in a tomb.) Thus he proved that he was not afraid of death and he was detached from everything on this earth. The simplicity and detached life had given credibility to his teachings.

### 6. Vemana's Literary Style

Writing is a means that expresses experience or thinking of oneself or those whom one represents. Vemana brought about the reign of human kingdom through his writings. His writings were prophetic but did not find favour with the literary world. One of the main reasons for disregarding Vemana's poetry, by the Telugu *literati*,



was that it did not measure up to the literary standards of the time. Even many present day poets recognize him only as a minor poet. He is considered one of the best notable *sataka* poet (a hundred of self complete verses, generally composed in one and the same meter). All verses of Vemana have a common *makutam* (refrain): *visvadabhirama vinuravema*, 'let the world listen to Vemana'. Among hundreds of *satakas*, Vemana's *satakam* stands out as it is original in intuition, acute in observation, quick and true in emotional response, penetrative in thought and bold in expression. He owes much of his popularity to his power of satire and irony. He did not compromise with the hard realities of life, but exposed their nakedness. His audience was mostly the uneducated villagers. The sincerity in his thoughts, his righteous indignation at all cant, humbug and deceit, his abounding love for humanity make his poetry natural, spontaneous and precious. His similes are full of natural and realistic talent. For example:

One who goes after a prostitute, leaving his wife, is like one who collects the waste grain while leaving the best in the field.

However we may try, as it is not possible to straighten dog's tail, it is not possible to change the attitudes of men!

Vemana does not mince words while washing away the dirt and suggests remedies in a humorous way. His humour consisted of sarcasm in words and *dvani*, suggestiveness, in meaning. For example:

There is no use in going and seeking milk from a cow that is barren and it will be same with the miser.

The monks will obtain salvation faster when they are attacked by wild animals than by going into hiding.

Vemana's vocabulary reflects and resonates with the daily life of the people. Most part of the language appears to be vulgar and impolite but he found it an effective means of social protest. As an example, while pointing out to the mindlessness in religious customs, he says: "you worship your ancestors in idols and give food to them and thus feed crows. How can a crow which eats human waste be a symbol of your ancestor?". His vocabulary is blunt and frightening when he attacks some Hindu religious practices. He compares them with the recluseness {shut away} of a dog, the meditations of a crane, the chanting of an ass and the bathing of a frog. He calls Vedas as courtesans, who delude men, wholly unintelligible; but he says that the hidden knowledge of God is like an honorable wife. He ridicules

the moral teachings of Hindu sages. To those who give importance to external asceticism, he says that they are, 'goats roaming through jungles', 'asses wallowing in the mire', and 'a dog curled upon dunghill'. At times he even mocked at the religious mythological figures. He mocked at Dharmaraja, the personification of truth and justice of Mahabharata, head of Panadvas, who killed the teacher by saying a lie and yet was called Dharmaraja:

There are scores of examples of rudeness and vulgarity in Vemana's poems, perhaps it is for this that his poems were so popular and appealing to common folk. Vemana summarized the Vedas and preached them in people's language as universal truths. Many of his poems, short in length, so sparkingly memorable, have passed into popular speech as phrases, idioms, proverbs, maxims and epigrams. Thus his writings, though he never attempted to compete with anyone, has set a new pattern of style distinct, original and enviable.

## 7. Vemana's cry for the Reign of God

We may ask a question at this stage. Is it justifiable to study the values of the Reign of God in the local or regional poets and in their writings? Is it fair to see universal human values in the writings of a local poet like Vemana? Is Vemana's idea of 'human community' the same as Reign of God preached by Jesus? Though, Vemana's community is limited in space and time, the concerns and struggles of his society are the same as those of the people of Israel. Vemana was a poet who heard the cries of his people. He could not remain a mere spectator nor could he let things go on as they were. Vemana's response consisted in his scathing attacks on different unjust actions in society and in suggesting means of removing them and making his community a better human society. We shall now take up some of the areas that Vemana touched upon in which we can identify the values of the Reign of God.

### 7.1. Religion

Vemana does not go into the domain of religion with a speculative or theoretical mind but he was more concerned with how religion should be an instrument to make men/women better human persons. His preoccupation was not *religion* as such but the prevailing religious situations of his time. He is a theist but not in the sense of limiting oneself to a particular God. He suggests that each one should find the Supreme Being (*paramatma*) and should unite one's *atma* (soul) with the *paramatma*.

In the beginning he was a devotee of Siva and belonged to the group of Veersaivites. Veersaivites stood for knowledge derived from experience, for faith based on apprehension, for social equality achieved through inter-caste marriages, for sanctity of life, for dignity of manual labour and for cultivation of ethical virtues. They denounced caste distinctions, gender discriminations and condemned untouchability. Veersaivism was imbued with the spirit of humanism. The members of this sect were drawn from all castes - the Brahmins from one end and the untouchables from the other end of the social scale.

But Vemana was disillusioned with this too. The ideals of the sect did not last long. He derided the externals of the cult of Siva, such as wearing of a lingam, observance of fast, long night vigils and pilgrimages. He decried that people give so much importance to the external practices but in the process actually forget Siva, the God. He calls such people imposters. The feuds between the rival sects of saivism and veersaivism had adverse effects on common people. Hence he advocated the human caste or religion that treats all humans as equals.

### **7.1.2. Superstitions, Idolatry and Pilgrimages**

Vemana was fully aware of the havoc caused to human, moral and psychological values by the negative aspects of religion. He was not against any religion nor was he concerned about religion as such but about the harmful elements that had taken root in religion. Let us consider a few of these aspects that he wanted to eliminate:

#### **7.1.2.1. Superstitions**

Vemana narrates a number of examples of superstition that caused menace to human beings, even physically. There were people who have abandoned their houses just because an owl (considered as a bad omen) landed on their house. There were others who avoided seeing the faces of widows as bad omen. People considered it a fortune if a lizard heard their conversation. Similarly they were sure of success if they saw an eagle on their journey. He could not understand how a *somayagi* (one who performs sacrifice and preaches non-violence) can attain *moksha* (liberation) when he strangles the throats of goats. Vemana denounces superstitions because they bury human wisdom and reasoning deep into the earth and bind the human into the clutches of tradition.

#### **7.1.2.2. Idolatry**

Vemana opposes idol worship. He asks god directly, "Do you



god, bestower of everything, require these things from man?" Addressing the Saivites in particular he says: "You worship the bull in stone, but you starve and ill-treat the living bull"

What can we think of the fools who bring mountain stones and knock them about with their hands and feet and after shaping them with masons, chisels, bow down to the rugged slabs.

Vemana does not show disrespect to the ancestors when he ridicules the periodical offerings to the manes (deified souls of departed ancestors) but reminds the people to respect the living ones.

### **7.1.2.3. Pilgrimages**

Vemana expresses a direct doubt if there is any use in undertaking long pilgrimages while not recognizing God within oneself and in the place where one is:

"No dog will turn into a lion nor a pig becomes an elephant by going to Kasi (pilgrim centre). No pilgrim will become saint if he does not change his character."

Vemana emphasizes internal transformation and renewal rather than putting on external appearances or taking up spiritual journeys.

### **7.2. Social Values**

The social conditions in the times of Vemana were no better than the religious conditions. Vemana was fully aware of the sufferings that the marginalized subaltern people were subjected to. He attacked evils like: social inequalities, gradations based on birth. He considered difference on ethical and on utilitarian grounds as weakening the society. Vemana advocated socialism to eradicate poverty. He argued that poverty is man-made and no one should run away from it by attributing it to one's fate or God. He sees wealth as one of the root causes of social discrimination including caste. Poverty kills the enthusiasm and motivation of the poor human to live.<sup>9</sup> As an existentialist Vemana analysed the social situation from immediate relations. He considered material poverty more harmful than spiritual poverty<sup>10</sup>: lack of wealth devoid of joy..., relatives too become enemies if you are poor..., even if one is a crook or thief, he can earn a good name through wealth.

The above few examples show the values and the counter-values in the teachings of Vemana. It was a bad humour for any one of his times, to speak of moral values but Vemana, disgusted with such situations, could not be a silent spectator. He demanded the abolition

of social barriers and the promotion of the building up of human community:

“Place one plate to eat, and invite every one in the village, without caste (consciousness) and make them eat together and show that all belong to one caste.”

### 7.3. *Caste and Untouchability*

Vemana is a man who reacts and responds to the immediate prevailing conditions of his community. He did not show any inclination towards analytical and academic assessment of the conditions. He talked about equality among all castes but did not speak about abolition of caste system<sup>11</sup>: “If we carefully observe and examine the universe, we shall see that all castes originated equally therein. Then we all men/women are equal”.

He ridicules the brahmin caste and their claim to superiority over the others. He says that the cord they wear is nothing but part of their profession, they neither acquire them at birth nor do they go with it after their death.

Vemana is a social rebel. He opposes outrightly the practice of untouchability. He considers it as the worst crime that human persons commit against each other. He asks, if the so called *untouchables* were not more precious than the chicks and pigs which eat all sorts of dirt and whose meat the high caste peoples relish. He resents some one reviling at the harijan or paraiah. He asks the question if there is any difference in the flesh of different peoples? He considers caste as irrelevant to human society.

### 7.4. *Vemana's new human world*

Vemana longed for a new human world where society would be free of any kind of division, discrimination or oppression. He hoped for equality among all men and women and desired to see every human person living his/her life fully. He went to the extent of saying that we should be ready to abandon any religion or tradition that comes in the way of human persons preventing them from living their lives in a dignified way. Spoken a few centuries ago, Vemana's words may not contain *standard* theological and philosophical solutions, but his teachings are very appealing to us today and useful to create new humanity even today and tomorrow.

#### 7.4.1. *The Human and Religion*

Vemana is not opposed to religion but never saw meaning in the

religious practices and observances that made a devotee slave to religious practices and did not allow him/her to converse with his/her God freely. He himself was deeply religious. His religious faith made him forsake his wife, children, his home and in fact, everything mundane and as a gesture of ultimate renunciation, even his clothes<sup>12</sup>. He wandered in search of his God. He preached tolerance towards other religions:

“He who does not swerve from his own religion, he who does not revile the creed of another is the best among men...

He rejected the religion that did not allow persons to discover the ultimate:

Unable to know the great secret, they continue and frame religions, and merely give sorrow to each other, like a dog that is agitated at its own image in a mirror.<sup>13</sup>

Vemana does not propose multiplication or duplication of religions but advises one to be faithful to one's religion and attain moksha through it. According to him no religion, ideology or philosophy can be a final word for humans. He affirms the doctrine of Upanishads which say that the ultimate end of human soul is to unite with the Supreme Soul (*Paramatma*)<sup>14</sup>. He believed in soul according to the teachings of Bhagavadgita. It says that by personal devotion and personal experience one becomes like God: “one will not meet God just by making pilgrimages after pilgrimages and does not see God within oneself. He who has bhakti will live in God”.

Thus Vemana's religion seeks to find God within oneself first. He even affirms that the human is with God and *God*, provided he/she attains perfect self-realization. He places the human as the center of all importance. His religion is basically humanistic.

#### **7.4.2. The Human - God**

Vemana transcends the popular Hindu definition of God where the concept of God was limited to a particular god like Siva, Vishnu and others. For him God is one “who takes all forms, eternal and Himself witnesses of all that is in every heart, who is in all things, the unchangeable, free from all taint”<sup>15</sup>. He invites the believer to go beyond his notion of God and see that God is above all that he/she can imagine.

He identifies nature or the universe with God by saying that “as every vessel contains a portion of the universe which after a temporary



separation is reunited to the great whole, the universe too joins its creator.”

He acknowledges the role of religion but according to him it should play only the role of finding God. He invites man to be contemplative and not solitary. Thus he hopes that man may live his life in a more meaningful way.

#### **7.4.3. The Human - Freedom**

The freedom that Vemana suggests for his new community is the supreme end to be pursued by every one. Freedom consists, as the Hindu scriptures say, in the liberation of the individual soul from the cycles of birth and deaths and its absorption into *paramatma*. This liberation depends on one's individual efforts. According to him the source of sin is in the heart and is the result of wilful and deliberate choice.

Change of heart is a more primary requirement for liberation than all the external measures like: penance, pilgrimages, asceticism etc. One has to conquer ones *ahamkara* (egoism) to obtain liberation *moksha*. For him *moksha* is equal to salvation that should lead to the absorption into the universal spirit. He was not a learned man but does show the signs of being under the vedantic influence which says that all effort and all notion are attributed to the one universal cause. He accepts the doctrine of illusion (*maya*)<sup>16</sup>. Vemana considered *maya*, which is the cause of ignorance, as that which alienates the human from God and thus s/he falls into the life-circle of *karma*. As a way out of this *maya* he advocates two terms: *tatvam* and *yogi*. *Tatvam* is the divine wisdom of truth and *yogi* is one who draws no distinction between day and night between a universal self and oneself. The goal is to achieve perfection.

#### **7.4.4. The Human - Moral life**

Vemana preached morals both to the old and to the young. Vemana proposed sevenfold moral activity in order to live a good life. They are: 1) Do not steal. 2) Love every creature and nature. 3) Do not hurt others. 4) Be satisfied with what one has. 5) Do not be jealous. 6) Control one's anger. 7) Think about God always .

The focal point in his moral teaching is his unrelenting attack on injustice and immoral life in society. He did not spare anyone or anything in his attack, starting from the projection of god to religious leaders who make life miserable to common man. Conquering one's desire and controlling one's senses are the best means to reach heaven. Dr. M. Subani divides Vemana's moral teaching into four parts:

#### **7.4.4.1. *Morals for rulers***

A ruler should be one who cares for his people. He should possess the qualities of mercy, justice, truth, humility and courage-(“dana dharmamulu dayayu satyamu niti...rajayogambulu..”)

#### **7.4.4.2. *Morals regarding Material Wealth***

Vemana distinguishes between two classes of people : rich and poor. Not sharing one's wealth is a crime. Collecting wealth and not doing charity, or at least to use it for oneself, will be like a bee collecting and leaving the honey in the honeycomb. Wealth should be a hard earned one.

#### **7.4.4.3. *Morals on social life***

Vemana discovered to his dismay that society was full of dishonesty, misery, discrimination and oppression. One man can change society for good or bad. He says that the mere accumulation of knowledge is not enough. It should be made use of it for the betterment of society. Society's life should be governed by highly cultivable qualities like: equality, fraternity, charity and unity.

#### **7.5.4.4. *Exemplary life***

Vemana cries aloud for change of heart in every one. He never respected those who preach but do not practice what they preach as exemplary. “One should overcome anger.” “One should not kill because killing makes one mean.” In this way Vemana lays down very lofty ideals and principles and offers concrete and simple guidelines. These four categories of aspects of moral life also serve as norms to live a better life.

### **7.5. *Man - Woman***

Vemana sees man and woman as the principal agents of building the new humanity. Today's social activists and feminine theologians may not find Vemana's reforms very encouraging as far as his concern towards the issues of women is concerned<sup>17</sup>. His prejudices against women ran high<sup>18</sup>. The main reason for these attitudes could be that he could not go beyond his personal and childhood experiences in this regard. However when he reminiscences himself about his mother he goes to the extent of saying that “he who knows his mother, knows his God.” Otherwise he went in line with the religious notions which projected women as second class citizens, confined to domestic life.

Vemana, though was not too radical concerning the issues on the plight of women, responded strongly on marriage and dowry

practices<sup>19</sup>. There was hardly any room for mutual selection of bride and bridegroom in marriage arrangements. Dowry played an important role. It has exposed the social inequalities in the community. He condemned the selling of girls in the name of dowry. He promoted inter-caste and inter-class marriages. He was very vociferous against the business of Devadasis making a girl servant of god in the temple. He considered them as pest to society. He discards them as if they were to be chewed like pan (beetle nut leaves). On a few occasions he does ask the question: "why these human beings (women) should be treated likewise and who are responsible for the plight of women?" Vemana was too aware that his society was a male-dominated one. He criticized the injustices and misconduct of men. Though the new humanity that Vemana proposes may not appear to be very radical to our times but his insistence of such values to the people of his times certainly were revolutionary and stirring. No other Telugu poet before him dared to criticize or point out the evil in society, much less demand change of the oppressive system. To this extent he becomes a real reformer and prophet.

## 8. The Personality of Vemana

Vemana is an outstanding man in many ways. He belongs to a particular community which has its distinct historical, social, religious, economic and cultural richness. Though he speaks in and through society and to people of his time, his message has the utmost relevance to all times and communities. The relevance of his teaching to today's world with its moral crisis, rootlessness, loss of sense of the direction and meaninglessness is all the more striking. He is a humanist who pledged to create a new heaven and a new earth here on earth itself. He advocated a human religion and his mission was the mission of love thus the true Reign of God. According to him "only he who considers the sorrow of his fellow humans as his/her own can be called a true human person." "The following traits of Vemana stand as characteristics of the servants of the Reign of God.

### 8.1. *Vemana – a poet of the people*

He was a prince among commoners and spoke to the myriad of commoners in their own accent and they opened their hearts to him. He went into the midst of people and wrote his poems from their milieu. He not only diagnosed the sickness (moral and spiritual) but even proposed remedies. He was so popular that he was even revered as a guru and became a legend to those who wanted to write poetry



for the people. He was respected not only in Andhra Pradesh but also in the neighbouring states. His poems were translated into Tamil and Kannada. He was not confined to any religion.

### 8.2. *Vemana - a rebel poet*

Vemana was one of the first poets in Telugu Literature who dared to disregard the eloquent style of poetry in order to make poetry more accessible to common man. He was non conventional both in his opinions and positions. He attacked and exposed vigorously social evils and prejudices. He was a rebel in thought, expressions and also in personal life. He dared to enter where others feared to enter, in order to transform it.

### 8.3. *Vemana - a prophet*

He was a prophet who was conscious of his mission. He was so profoundly shaken by the utter hollowness of the social and religious life. He strove with all his might to deliver them from the bondage of traditionalism and to enable them to realize the supreme importance of truth, justice and purity of the duty to fellow humans and to God. He taught people to distinguish between the external and the internal. He asked people to live like real human beings and thus give reason a chance<sup>20</sup>.

### 8.4. *Vemana - a philosopher*

Vemana was not a philosophical genius nor was he well versed in the *Prasthanatraya* (three standard scriptures of India: the Upanishads, the Brahmasutras and the Bhagavadgita). Through his original insights and rich life experiences he expounds his own philosophy of society, ethics and religion. As a social philosopher he places the common man on the general level of living a good moral life and live like a *yogi*. In his philosophy of religion he goes in line with the *advaitas*, though he does not affirm everything of *advaitins*. His philosophy is basically a humanist one.

## 9. Vemana's Contribution to Today's Human World

Vemana's contribution did not remain with the literary world. The common refrain at the end of every poem "visvadahirama vinuravema" ("Listen O Vema, the delighter of the world") has a universal appeal. He strives for a human community that knows no barriers. He says that truth is truth by whatever name (religion) one calls it. Pot or mountain is the same though they are called with different names (pot/kunda in Telugu or kumbha in Sanskrit, similarly mountain -

konda in Telugu or Parvat in Sanskrit). Language and religion are not the ultimate end, but only means. Ultimate purpose is *lokasangraha* (human welfare) which finally leads to get united with God the supreme end. Vemana, already a few centuries ago, laid the foundation for a happy human community with the help of 'intra-human relationships': co-existing religious communities with mutual dialogues. He was also very practical when he said that we need to live our humanity in this life where we live, while at the same time hoping to be united with the Supreme Being. In this process he does not rule out various opinions on issues that concern human persons but they should be treated with respect: "I may be a Muslim but my soul should become a transformed guiding force." It is only when one strives towards this, is it possible to become an enlightened person. This is the goal that Vemana sets for every human person. When an individual is transformed the community is transformed.

## 10. Conclusion

Vemana, a multi-faceted personality brought new hope to humanity with his commentary on life in society through his writings. Looking at the wealth of his teachings and contribution towards a better life of human persons one wonders if it was possible to this illiterate man. The values to be fostered by every human person that we have seen in the article present the coming of the Reign of God within human world. Vemana was a man from his community and searched for the welfare of his community. He touched on the root-cause of the disease and proposed plain remedies. His analysis of the community did not depend on any scientific method but only on his individual experiences, perceptions observations and convictions. He was one who thought and responded on behalf of the people of his community. It was for this that the people of his community accepted him as their prophet and never doubted his sincerity and commitment.

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## Foot Notes

1. See V.R.Narla, *Vemana through Western Eyes*, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1969, p.17.

2. Some Scholars identified Vemana with Kapus (the caste of the farmeres, though agriculture was not restricted only to this caste) but most scholars like S.M.Subani identify Vemana with Reddy caste. See S.M.Subani, *Vemana, Jeevitamu, Sahitya Samagraparishiilanamu* (Vemana, Life, Writings, Comprehensive Study), Viswa Shanti Literary Publications, Ponnur, 1988, pp. 112-116
3. See V.R.Narala (Note above no.1.), p.3.
4. Ibid, pp. 5-6. C.P.Brown was one of the servants of the (British) Company who governed India before Independence. He was a member of Madras Civil Service. He published his Selection of Vemana Verses in 1829, under the title, *The Verses of Vemana: Moral, Religious and Satirical*. He even made reference to Vemana in his autobiographical piece: *Some Account of the Literary Life of Charles Philip Brown*, 1840, and in his article, "Essay on the Creed Customs and Literature of the Jangamas", 1840.
5. See S.M.Subani (note above no.2), p.635.
6. See V.R.Narla, (see note above no.1), p. 13
7. Ibid, p. 15.
8. Ibid.
9. See Venkateswara Rao Tripureneni, *visvadabhirama vinuravema*, (Listen ! O Vema delighter of the world). Vemana vikasakendra, Vijayawada, 1981, pp. XXXXXIX.
10. Ibid, p. 34.
11. Ibid.p. 31
12. The term "Degambara" means naked. One of the two main Jain sects are called Digambara. The other is "Swethambara" meaning white-robbd. Ambara means clothe (s) that one wears to cover the body. The swethambaras practiced extreme asceticism.
13. See C.P. Brown, *Verses of Vemana*, Asian Education Services, New Delhi, 1986, p. 274.
14. See S.M.Subani (see note above no.2), pp. 274-275. She gives the simile: all rivers ultimately join the ocean so also the all atamas join paramatma.
15. See V.R.Narla (see note above, no.1.), p. 63
16. See Cattamanchali Ramalinga Reddy, Radio talk on "Vemana", All India Radio, Madras and Vijayawada, 1950
17. See S.M. Subani, (see note above, no.2). p.
18. See V.R.Narla, (see note above no.1), pp. 37-41
19. See Gurram Venkata Reddy, *Viplavayogi-visvakavi Vemana*. (Revolutionary Yogi, Universal Poet – Vemana), Ujjvala Printers, Kurnool, 1988, p. 148-149. See Bangorey, "Vemana - Dr.C.R.Reddy", Talk delivered on behalf of Dr.C.R.Reddy Celebration Committee, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, 1981.



# **Basava:**

## **Service to Humanity is Service to God**

**Henry D'Almeida**

Basava, poet, mystic and spiritual leader of Karnataka, got peoples together around the values of justice and freedom, equality and respect. Though born of a brahmin family he challenged the conventional purity laws and outdated rituals; he upheld the equality of all human persons beyond caste discrimination. His mystical aphorisms (*vacanas*) offer a rich material for a theology based on liberative values, a spirituality grounded in the unity of humanity. Henry Dálmeida delves into the world of the spiritual and ethical teachings of Basavanna. Henry D'Almeida SJ is a research student in theology at Vidyajyoti, Delhi.

### **1. Introduction**

In the 12th century, Karnataka witnessed a revolutionary religious renaissance under the charismatic leadership of Basaveśvara<sup>1</sup>. His was a response to the decadent and oppressive structures of caste hierarchy, temple cult, brahminic orthodoxy and inequality based on caste, gender, profession and class. The visible and conscience pricking practice of untouchability, rules of pollution and hypocrisy faced sharp criticism by Basavaṇṇa. The new faith spearheaded by Basava is called Vīraśaivism<sup>2</sup> or Liṅgāyatism<sup>3</sup>. It was a rejuvenated form of the then existing Kālāmukha<sup>4</sup> and Pāśupata<sup>5</sup> sects of śaivism. Basava received his inspiration also from the sixty three saints of Tamil śaivism<sup>6</sup>. The impact of the new movement was multifaceted. No wonder Nicol Macnicol called Basava "the Luther of India"<sup>7</sup>.

Today liṅgāyats or vīraśaivites are a powerful group in Karnataka. According to 1991 census estimate they form around 22% of

Karnataka population<sup>8</sup>. They play a significant role in the socio-cultural, religious, economic and political spheres of Karnataka.

The aim of the present essay is to explore the noble ideals of Basava as they are found in his *vacanās*. Our focus will be on the values of the Reign of God (freedom, justice and fellowship). As a background, some aspects of his life and times, and his writings are explored. The paper will conclude with a Christian theological reflection on Basavaṇṇa's contribution to humanity.

## 2.0. Life and Times of Basavaṇṇa

In the person of Basava there is a confluence of many traits: a saint, a poet, a political activist, a religious reformer, a minister in the royal court of Bijjala<sup>9</sup> and an ideal householder. He was praised, slandered and condemned too. Basava is known as Basavaṇṇa as a mark of affection and as Basaveśvara as a mark of reverence.

Basava was born in<sup>10</sup> Bāgewādi<sup>11</sup> in a Brahmin *agrahāra*<sup>12</sup>. His parents, Mādirāja and Mādalāmbikā were a devout śaiva couple. It is said that Basava was their only son born to them by the grace of Nandikeśwara siva<sup>13</sup>. Hence the child was named Basava<sup>14</sup>. Early in his life Basava realized, to his great despair, the prevailing great gulf between the high and the low castes. The religious practice was full of rigid ritualism and oppressive superstitions. He revolted against his initiation ceremony and left for Kūḍala Sangama<sup>15</sup> in search of realization. He was initiated into the new faith by his guru Īśānya. Basava studied the śaiva *purāṇas* (myths) and *āgamas* (rituals). By the urge of his guru and the inner voice he went to the court of Bijjala, the Kalachūrya<sup>16</sup> king in Kalyāṇa<sup>17</sup>. Basava became his chief treasurer. In due time Basava was drawing a significant following to his new faith. People from the lower castes and the outcasts found a new sense of freedom as they became *śaraṇas*<sup>18</sup>. Weavers, farmers, hunters, fishermen, shoemakers, barbers and some brahmins thronged to Basava whose *great house*<sup>19</sup> was always open to these. The new faith openly challenged the existing social inequality, dehumanizing caste, class and sex discrimination. It also ignored many of the purity conventions. The growing popularity of Basava made the king jealous. The threatened Brahminic orthodoxy tried to poison the mind of Bijjala. The privileged temple cult was given a death blow by the new doctrine of worshipping God as an *iṣṭalinga*<sup>20</sup>. In the growing

rift between the king and Basavaṇṇa the cunning orthodoxy found an apt occasion to smother the new movement. A marriage between the son of an outcast<sup>21</sup> and the daughter of a brahmin<sup>22</sup> was a direct affront to the age old caste-hierarchy. The 'heretics' were executed by plucking out their eyes. Basava's followers were seeking revenge. Though Basavaṇṇa pleaded non-violence it was of no avail. King Bijjala was assassinated. The aftermath of this event saw the bloody slaughter of many śaranas. Basava, with grief and remorse left Kalyāṇa and came to Kūḍala Sangama and there he became one with his personal deity.

The legacy of Basava was kept alive and passed on to the later generations by his followers. It is available to us in *Vacanās*<sup>23</sup>.

### 3.0 Writings

They are called *Vacanās*. Vacana means a 'spontaneous utterance of a spiritual experience'. In contrast to the great tradition it was not written in mythical narratives; the meter was not syllabic but syntactic. It abounds in parallelism, repetitions and recurring formulae. Written in simple Kannaḍa, the local language, it is easily understood by the common people. Vacana literature was a great literary revolution in Kannaḍa which was earlier under the burden of sanskritic tradition. Each vacanā ends with a signature (*ankita*)<sup>24</sup> that gives a clue to the author and his/her personal deity. There are different types of them : social criticism, mysticism, riddles and paradoxes. What characterizes them is the directness, spontaneity, freshness and originality of images. There are allusions to sixty three Nāyanmārs (Tamil Saints) whom Vīraśaivas consider as their forefathers.

Basavaṇṇa has written around 1400 vacanas. His vacanas end with 'Kudala Sangama deva' (i.e. the Lord of the confluence of the two rivers, Krisna and Malaprabha in Bijapur).

### 4.0. Values of God's Reign in the Vacanas of Basavaṇṇa

#### 4.1. Equality

Basava's main contribution is his relentless war against the oppressive and dehumanizing caste. He dreamt of a casteless and egalitarian society based on the principle of unity of all human beings and one divine source. He vehemently opposed brahminic religion which was promoting priestcraft, dogmatism, clericalism and ritualism. Basava's vacanas bear ample evidence to the personal



integrity and mission of establishing equality among human beings regardless of caste, gender and profession.

The following vacana expresses Basava's solidarity with the untouchables, though himself was a Brahmin.

I am Madara's son<sup>25</sup>.

Him, who derives his pedigree  
Down from the ancient saints and claims  
Hara as founder of his stock<sup>26</sup>  
My father it was who washed my dirt<sup>27</sup>  
This taint of caste!

I am, good Sir, Madara's son  
O Kudala Sangama, thou serpent collared Lord<sup>28</sup>  
Thy grandsire's grandsire's sire  
is Cennayya<sup>29</sup> (347)<sup>30</sup>

Since Hara is the source of Madara's son, an outcast, Basavanna deems it an honour to be a son of an outcast. Further Siva himself has cleansed his caste dirt; so where is the basis for discrimination.

Basava's identification with the untouchables and his attack on oppressive caste-monolith goes even to the extent of deriding his own birth. In contrast to Brhamins tracing their pedigree to ancient seers Basavanna traces it to the lowest strata whom he considers privileged

The son of a servant maid in Cennayya's house  
The daughter of the maid in Kakkayya's house<sup>31</sup>  
These two went out to gather dung  
and fell together: I the Son  
Born of these two — so witness me  
Lord Kudala Sangama! (345)

Caste discrimination is against Siva's will since Bhakta's body is Siva's own manifestation.

After the coronation,  
why look for the royal marks?  
After the Linga worship, why ask for a person's class?  
Since Lord Kudala Sangama has said:  
'A bhakta's body is my own' (138)

Someone who clings to caste is in darkness and impure.  
Clinging to caste, you seek impurities:  
You look for darkness, while you cling to light  
Why you, you silly man!

You claim to be superior by caste:  
 Is there any benefit  
 By a hundred billion priests? (594)

The real criteria for a high-born is allegiance to Lord Siva. Though Siva's devotee is a dog-eater he is greater than the knowers of Vedas. What matters is closeness to the Divine and not so much expertise in scriptures and the systems of philosophy.

What if he knows the four Vedas?  
 Without linga he is a low-born man!  
 What is he an outcast  
 with linga he is a holy place!  
 His prasada is to me ambrosia sweet<sup>32</sup>  
 'one who has the four Vedas by heart,  
 he is not dear to me;  
 A svapaca, although he cooks dogs' meat  
 is dear to me<sup>33</sup>

To him you give , from him receive;  
 He is as venerable as myself,  
 one who knows Kudala Sangama and worships  
 is greater than the six systems;<sup>34</sup>  
 He is holy to the world, you know! (605)

The basis of caste system is challenged here. When there is one earth, one water, who can claim caste superiority? So the whole humankind is one family and there is no place for discrimination based on caste, sect and gender.

There is one earth to hold  
 God's temple and the pariah colony;  
 one water for the closet and the bath;  
 one sect for those who know themselves;  
 one need for those who are released  
 By means of the six-fold mystic way<sup>35</sup>  
 One height for those who know thee,  
 Lord Kudala Sangama! (878)

Persons of all castes come from their mother's womb. Then how could *sudra* alone be an untouchable? Since *sudra* carries away the corpse, which would otherwise decompose, in fact he is rendering a service. In the name of *sastra* those who kill and commit violence are real untouchables.

You man who, born of flow of blood  
 are keen on caste, you are  
 the son of a common wench!  
 Who is he a low-born man  
 who carries carrion?  
 you kill your meat, shouldering it home!  
 Our kudala sanga's saranas  
 are-karma-free, have God in them (575)

All irrespective of their births are subject to desire, anger and joy. The bodies of all are made out of the same seven elements<sup>36</sup>. The names of different castes are just the names of different kinds of work people do. The real criterion is one's closeness to and knowledge of God.

What's the rule to judge a caste  
 "The embryo needs the seven elements:  
 It's the same births out of the same womb;  
 Same the alliance of self and soul:  
 What, then, the usefulness of caste?  
 you are a blacksmith if you heat;  
 A washerman if you beat;  
 A weaver, if you lay the warp  
 A brahmin, if you read the books!  
 Is anybody in the world  
 Delivered through the ear?  
 Therefore, O Kudala Sangama Lord  
 The well-born is the man who knows  
 The nature of Divinity! (589)

The men mentioned in the puranas, though of lower births considered great by their rights. What is important is that one should believe in God. All are human beings and children of the one God.

Vyasa was the son of a fisher-woman  
 Markandeya, the son of a candali<sup>37</sup>  
 Mandodari was the daughter of a frog.  
 Don't look for the caste, oh! folk!  
 What became you through caste?  
 The very Agastya was a boatman  
 Durvasa a mason



Kasyapa, a black smith,<sup>38</sup>  
 Kaundimya, as all the three-worlds know was a barber<sup>39</sup>  
 The Lord of our Lord Kudalasangama says thus:  
 'Be the eater of dog's flesh,  
 If he be the devotee of siva  
 He is the high-born (588)

For Basava all are the same. If he does not subscribe to this basic creed, let 'Lord Kudala sangama chop off my nose', he pleads.

Who is a real pariah, a man of lower birth? Is he not one who kills, and hates?

The man who slays is a pariah  
 The man who eats the cession is a low-caste person.  
 Where is the caste here - where?  
 our kudala sanga's sarana  
 who loves all living things  
 He is the well-born one! (590)

Lineage does not enhance human dignity; but it is the quality of life. Even a pariah's company may be sought if his conduct is good.

Observe Sir, if a pariah behaves  
 the right way, it's good to court  
 His company ... without offence (135)

The following vacana crowns the teaching of Basava on equality. He is propounding a universal family. There are no strangers in this world. "Hell is not the other" but an intimately connected person.

Let them not say, O Lord  
 'whose is he, whose O whose?  
 Let them say rather, 'He is ours,  
 He's ours, he's ours!  
 O Kudala sangama Lord, let me be  
 a son of thine own house! (62)

#### *4.2. Concept of God and true Religiosity*

Basava, the strong monotheist has a sharp criticism of the religion prevalent in its decadent and oppressive form. With an apt analogy of wife's fidelity to her husband, Basavanna rebukes those who go after many gods:

God is but one, many His names,  
The faithful wife knows but one Lord; (613)

Out of compassion towards children Siva has taken the form of a Jangama, "the sovereign moving God," the moving linga<sup>40</sup>. Jangama is the intangible made tangible, He is the true temple where siva is embodied.

Could you paint a picture without a wall?  
Could you, without the ground, make seed to grow?  
Could you have worship without jangama?  
Could you analyse the Divinity?  
Since Lord Kudala sangama  
creator, tranquil, bodiless  
has taken the form of Jangama,  
I know naught else, good Sir! (398)

God is all-pervasive. He is the universal face and arms. One is in the midst of inescapable omniscient and omnipresent God.

Whichever way I look  
Thou only art O Lord  
The form of all the circumambient space  
Thou only art, O Lord!  
Thou art the universal eye,  
Thou the universal face!  
Thou art the arms of all, O Lord  
And thou the feet, O Kudala Sangama Lord! (532)

The bond of union with God is very intimate. He is the father, mother, kith and kin. He is more intimate to myself than I am to myself.

My father, thou, my mother too;  
Thou also all my kith and kin..  
Save thou no kindred is to me  
O kudala sangama Lord  
Do with me as thou please! (480)

The proper disposition towards this God is surrender. God knows everything. He is the true refuge.

Thine are my weal and woe  
My loss and gain are thine

Thine too my honour and shame;  
O Lord kudala sangama

How can the creeper feel the weight of its own fruit? (60)

Since God is our Father, no sin is too great for Him. Even, one utterance of 'I bow' destroys the cloud of sin.

Man, O man, you who committed the sin,  
you who slew the saint,  
do say but once, 'I bow'!...  
If you once say, 'I bow'  
All sinning flees away! (619)

#### 4.3. *Secular is Divine*

Basava was against the pseudo-division between this world and the other world. For him this world is very real. His is the down to earth spirituality. Truth and good works are the essentials of true spirituality.

Behold! between the worlds  
of mortals and of gods  
There is no difference!  
To speak the truth is world of gods;  
To speak untruth, the mortal world.  
Good works is heaven,  
Bad work is hell  
And you can witness it,  
O Lord kudala sangama! (239)

Basava rejects the unreality of the world and advocates responsibility towards the world. In the life of a sarana the worldly and heavenly concerns find fusion. Dualism is denied; life in this world is of paramount importance:

God is minting mankind on this earth;  
He who is accepted as genuine on this earth  
is accepted there also.  
He who is not accepted here,  
is not accepted there also.  
Lord kudala sangama (155)

#### 4.4. *Sharing*

Sharing is the true mark of a devotee; one who fails to share is worse than birds and animals



Does not a crow, on seeing a crumb  
call to its flock?  
Does not a hen, on finding a morsel  
Call, clacking to her brood?  
If being a bhakta, a man lacks loyalty  
To his own faith  
He is worse than hen or crow  
O kudala sangama Lord! (437)

#### 4.5. *Compassion*

Compassion is the basis and core of a religion. Here Basava has given an excellent meeting-point for all the religions. Compassion is synonymous with religion.

Can there be a Dharma without compassion?  
Compassion there must be towards all beings in the world.  
Compassion is the source of religion.  
Kudala Sangayya will not accept anything else (247)

#### 4.6. *True Temple*

God is not represented by the standing, perishable temples. The rich toil in vain. The real temple is the human body

The rich build temple but poor as I am  
What can I do?  
This my body is my temple:  
My legs are its pillars  
My body is the sanctum  
My head is verily the golden pinnacle , the kalasa  
O hear! Lord kudala sangama.  
Matter is perishable  
But not the spirit (820)<sup>41</sup>

Hypocrisy of the priestly class get severe reprimand from Basava. Devotions devoid of sincerity and honesty are useless according to Basava. True worship has to be centred around Siva alone.

O sir, wherever they see water  
They dip in it  
Wherever they see a tree  
They circle it!  
O kudala sangama Lord,  
How can they know thee, they who seek  
water that dries up and the withering tree (579)

4.7. *Ethical Values*

True religion stands on strong moral edifice. Basava advocates seven principles of conduct. One is reminded of the decalogue (Ex 20:1-17):

Thou shall not steal nor kill,  
nor speak a lie;  
Be angry with no one,  
nor scorn another man,  
nor glory in thyself,  
nor others hold to blame;  
This is your inward purity;  
This is your outward purity;  
This is the way to win our Lord  
Kudala sangama (238)

Basava condemns self righteousness. Before pointing a finger at others, one has to mend one's own ways first. Judge not; lest you be judged.

Why should you try to mend  
the failings of the world?  
Assuage your bodies first,  
each one of you!  
Assuage your minds, each one!  
Lord kudala sangama  
Does not approve  
those who bemoan  
the neighbour grief. (124)

Besava truly exemplifies supreme humility in the following vacana.

Lesser than I  
No, there is none!  
Greater than sivas' devotees  
No, there is none! (334)

By showing anger one loses one's dignity. Anger is compared to fire that burns one's own house.

Why Sir, be angry with those  
who are angry with you?  
What does it mean to you,  
or what their loss?  
To show one's anger means

a loss of dignity  
To feel it, a loss of sense. (248)

#### 4.8 *Kayaka and Dasoha*

These two concepts and their practical application were directed against the Brahmanic orthodoxy. *Kayaka* is connected with the body<sup>42</sup>. The work undertaken by the body purified by the *linga* as a means of salvation is *kayaka*. The idea behind this is that no one should be a burden to society. Further as opposed to brahminic teaching, work is not binding, but when done in sincerity and with a spirit of dedication, work becomes a means for salvation. *Kayaka* was a revolutionary concept anticipating socialism. *Dasoha* is very much a related term. It implies that one should serve humanity according to the income he has derived from the *Kayaka*. One should not keep for oneself more than what one needs for living. Hence work becomes sublime, a vocation and not just for livelihood.

In Basava's teachings work is worship:

What you call the world of gods  
What you call the mortal world-  
are they some other place?  
Why, in this very world  
are infinite worlds besides.  
Where godlike works are done  
there is the siva-world;  
The place where a *bhakta* is  
a *varanasi*, and his body is  
*kailasa*! This is a fact,  
O Lord *kudala sangama*! (139)

#### 4.9 *Position of Women*

Women could receive the *lingadiksa* and wear the *Ishtalinga*<sup>43</sup>. Many women participated in the discussions held at *Anubhava Mantapa*. (the assembly of experiences)<sup>44</sup>. *Akka Mahadevi*,<sup>45</sup> *Sattyakka*,<sup>46</sup> *Muktayakka*<sup>47</sup> are some prominent names. Basava himself has this to say in one of the *vacanas*:

Do you hear me, man child:  
For you alone I wore  
this male attire!  
one time will I become a man,



one time a woman be:  
 O kudala sangama lord,  
 For you and I a warrior man,  
 a girl-bride for your saranas! (703)<sup>48</sup>

#### 4.10. *Anubhava Mantapa*

To give a concrete shape to equality Basava established the Anubhava Mantapa (the hall of experience). The membership transcended caste, sex and age. It promoted exchanges of religious experience and various discussion. "Great saints met in the centre for dialogue and communion ... the saints were drawn from every social class, caste and trade, touchable and untouchable: from kings, ministers to manual workers, laundrymen, boatmen, leather workers."<sup>49</sup> They encouraged inter-dining and inter-marriage. The community upheld the dignity of labour and sanctified work or Kayaka. It was sort of a primitive communism. The presence of women was quite significant.

#### 5.0. A Christian Theological Reflection

Both Jesus and Basava emerged during critical times of oppression and degradation of religion. The need was to bring humanity back to the divine centre. There is a strong sense of monotheism and social commitment in their teachings. Both criticized sharply the excessive ritualism steeped into their ancestral religion. Their deep sensitivity to the sufferings of the marginalized is very conspicuous in their words and deeds. Jesus rejected racial, ethnic and gender discriminations on the basis of common Fatherhood of God. For Basavanna Siva is the source and destination.

Both used the spoken languages of the common people i.e., Kannada and Aramaic. For Basava, vacanas became an apt medium to communicate his message. Jesus spoke in parables.

As Basava, Jesus too was very critical of the temple cult and the oppressive clericalism. He spoke about the temple of his body (Jn 2:25). Here we are reminded of many allusions to body as temple in the letters of the N.T. (1 Cor 3:16, 2 Cor 6:16, 1 Cor 12:27). Basava's teachings abound in ethical values. They resonate with the decalogue (Ex 20: 1-17) and sermon on the Mount.<sup>50</sup>

The basis of equality and dignity of all in the Bible is in that all

are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). All those who are in Christ are the children of God; there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female (Gal 3:28). God shows no partiality and He accepts all who fear him and do what is right (Acts 10:34-35). Basava makes initiation to linga worship and good conduct the basis of equality. All other considerations of status, caste, class and gender are secondary.

Basava differed significantly from other Bhakti traditions in making work a means of salvation. Work does not bind if it is done with a divine motive. His concept of 'work is worship' is revolutionary. Jesus too gave the first priority to do His Father's work.<sup>51</sup> One is also reminded of St Paul's admonition to the Thessalonians<sup>52</sup>.

The concept of Dasoha, which demands that the wealth earned by proper work should be in service of humanity. It was an antidote to greed. We have the first Christian community ideal in the Acts (Acts 2:44-45) to give us an example of sharing and communion. Jesus admonishes the rich man to give up everything and serve the poor (Mt 19:16-22). The utmost giving is exemplified by Jesus Himself (Mk 10:45, Phil 2:5-11)<sup>53</sup>.

'Anubhava Mantapa' (Hall of Religious Experience), has a parallel in the primitive christian community<sup>54</sup>. It was a fellowship based on sharing, communion and equality.

Jesus made the human the centre of religion, "Sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (Mk 2:27-28)<sup>55</sup>. He tried to establish an inclusive community where the victims would be given a preferential option (Lk 4:14-18). Women, Samaritans, the sinners received his special attention<sup>56</sup>. His was a religion of mercy and compassion<sup>57</sup>.

It has been a spiritually enriching experience to journey with Basavanna. As we glean through the Vacanas we encounter many values of God's Reign enshrined there. These are witnesses to the working and the presence of the Spirit Divine. Basavanna's life and teaching are a clear example of the Spirit's powerful activity of bringing about peace and harmony in the world. God's Spirit works in and through and also beyond religions. We need openness to this Spirit to recognise the Divine in our midst. When one goes deeper into Basava's thought somehow one finds at the origin, the roots, a common source and a concern of integral liberation of all.

## Foot Notes

1. The other names are Basava and Basavanna. Basavesvara is a title of reverence.
2. The heroic followers of Siva
3. The religion of those who wear *linga*, the phallic symbol for Siva. Today the followers prefer to be called as lingayats (the wearers of linga).
4. One of the dominant schools of saivism in medieval Karnataka.
5. Saiva sect founded by Lakulisa
6. The 63 nayanmars described in the Tamil classical work Periyapuranam are called puratanaru in Basavas vacanas.
7. Nicol Macnicol. Indian Theism, 1915, p. 177.
8. The percentage of lingayats is likely to be more than what is shown in the census since many of them refer to themselves as Hindus. Recently Mathe Mahadevi, a prominent woman lingayat leader urged the followers to register themselves as a separate religion.
9. A Kalachurya King
10. The date of birth of Basava is uncertain. Some think that he was born in 1105 A.D. and attained union in 1165 A.D.
11. A small town near Bijapur
12. A Village or land donated to Brahmins.
13. A bull, siva's vehicle.
14. Basava from Vrsabha, the bull.
15. Confluence of two rivers, i.e. Krishna and Malaprabha in Bijapur.
16. Kalachurya dynasty (100-1167). Their original homeland was Madhya Pradesh. They migrated to Mangalavede and were under the political patronage of Chalukyas of Kalyana.
17. Kalyana is in Bidar (North Karnataka. Now it is called Basava Kalyana.)
18. *Sarana* means either a devotee or the one who has reached the fifth stage of the Satsthala system.
19. It was called 'Mahamane' in Kannada.
20. *Istalinga* is the personal linga worn and worshiped by the lingayats as the main symbol of their faith.
21. The outcasts name was Haralayya, a shoemaker one of the saranas.
22. Madhuvayya or Madhuvarana. One of the king's ministers and a sarana.
23. *Vacana* - 'what is said', as opposed to *sruti* (what is heard) and *smṛti* (what is remembered). It is the spontaneous outburst of religious experience.
24. *ankita* the seal or signature. 25. *Madara* - a low caste, here Cennayya
26. *Hara* is Siva 27. My father - Basava considers siva as his real father.
28. Serpent collared Lord, i.e. siva.
29. Cennayya - madara cennayya. a sarana. Basava uses his name often to bring out his humility and nobility.
30. The number in the bracket is as found in vacanas of Basavanna. 1967. Edited by H. Deveerappa. Translated by L.M.A. Menezes and S.M. Angadi. Sirigere: Annana Balaga.



31. *Kakkayya* - Dohara Kakkayya, a tanner, sarana
32. *Prasada* - gift of grace, consecrated food, food given to the Jangama, after being blessed given back to the devotees. one of the 8 sacred symbols of virasaivism (astavaranas - Guru, linga, Jangama, padodaka, Prasada, vibhuti, rudraksa and mantra)
33. *Svapaca* - one who cooks dog-meat, an outcast
34. Six systems - Nyaya, vaishesika, sankhya, yoga, Purva Mimamsa and vedanta, the six schools of Indian Philosophy.
35. Six fold mystic way - i.e. *satsthala* - the doctrine of the six stages in the spiritual progress of the devotee: Bhaktasthala, Mahesvarasthala, Prasadisthala, Pranalingasthala, saranasthala and aikyasthala. It has similarities with the Jaina doctrine of Gunasthanas and the 3-ways in christianity.
36. Seven elements (*sapta dhatu*): Blood, marrow, fat, flesh, bone, chyle and semen.
37. *Markandeya* - sage, son of Mrkandu, known for austerities and longevity of life.
38. *Kasyapa* - Ancient sage, blacksmiths by profession.
39. *Kaundinya* - Ancient sage, a barber by profession.
40. *Jangama* - a religious mendicant teacher, Worshipped as the manifestation of Siva; one of the eight sacred symbols in Virasaivism (astavaranas). Principle of dynamism as opposed to Sthavara (static)
41. This vacana beautifully sums up the teachings of virasaivism. The poem abounds in contrasts: making and being, rich and poor. Standing and moving, temple and the body.
42. *Kayaka* refers to any work taken up as a means of realization. It is the work done by the purified body (Deha becomes kaya). 'Kayakave Kailasa' (work is worship/heaven) beings out the import.
43. *Linga-diksa* - Initiation into the linga wearing. During the rite the new convert receives a personal linga from the hands of his guru who breathes life into the linga.
44. *Anubhava Mantapa* - 'Hall of Experience' Meeting place for the saranas to share and discuss. It was founded by Basava at kalyana. There was 'sunya simhasana' (seat of void). Allama Prabhu was a prominent person in this Hall.
45. *Akka Mahadevi*: female wandering sarana. A prominent woman - saint of Karnataka. Died at a young age at Srisaile.
46. *Satyakka* - a sarana, a sweeper.
47. *Muktayakka* - Sister of Ajaganna, female. Wandering ascetic
48. Basava relativizes the gender roles. According to circumstances one can assume different roles.
49. A.K. Ramanujan, Speaking of Siva, pp. 63-64 and p. 35.
50. Mt 5:21-32, 38-48, 7:1ff.
51. See Jn 4:34, 5:17, 5:30, 10:37
52. 2 Thes 3:6-13, also 1 Thes 5:14

53. Dasoha - service to Jangama and towards the poor. It is a servant like attitude (Dasoham) as opposed to soham (I am he)
54. See Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-37, 5:12-16.
55. Also Mt 12:1-8, Lk 6:1-5
56. See parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) Jn 4:1-42, Lk 7:1-17,36.
57. Mt 12:7, Lk 6:36, Mt 23:23, Lk 10:37

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# Narayana Guru: The Human Concern at the Core of Religion

Paul Valiakandathil

Narayana Guru, the prominent socio-religious reformer of 19/20 century Kerala comes from the Ezhava caste. Through an intense study of the classical Scriptures, rigorous ascetical life and involvement in the struggles of the poor he emerged as the 'social liberator' of the oppressed of the Kerala society. Out of his advaitic spiritual experience he developed an egalitarian social perspective that gave the Ezhavas and others a new sense of worth and courage to assert their rights. In his vision and way of life Paul Valiakandathil SJ finds the movement in the Reign of God. Paul is involved in social transformation projects.

## Freedom for the Outcasts

Sree Narayana Guru announced his historical presence with an extraordinary religious act. He, an *Ezhava* - a man of the lower caste in Kerala, consecrated and installed a *Sivalinga*, a rough hewn granite block which he hauled up from Neyyar river, the life line of the district of Trivandrum. Villagers of sylvan Aruvippuram and the neighbouring hamlets were the witnesses to this extraordinary act. Prior to the act Guru was in deep meditation in his hut. At midnight he rose from prayer, walked to the river bed, plunged into the waters and came up with a dripping stone. He spent about three hours in meditation on the raised platform of a rock near his hut. As he prayed tears flowed from his eyes and the deeply impressed congregation intoned the *panchkshari manthra*. At the end of his prayer he installed the *Sivalinga*, the phallus idol of Siva. On the wall of the adjoining hut was the following quatrain:

Jāti bhēdam, matā dwēsham

Ethumillāthe sarvarum

Sodaratvena vāzhunna

Māthruka sthānamānitu<sup>1</sup>

(Caste divide and religious rivalry

None such tainting, all here

Live as children to one mother

A model dwelling this here.)

Both the deed and the inscription together spelt out the radical nature of Narayana Guru's religious and social movement.

This event was almost universally been spoken of as historic. This took place in 1888, on the *Sivarathri* night. It was a challenge thrown at the religions and social hierarchy of Kerala. The Brahmin had reserved to themselves the right to perform all religious rites and they had the monopoly of the higher deities (*Sad-Daiva moorthies*). The people outside the pale of the high caste communities had to be satisfied with the inferior gods (*durdevatas*). The rites performed by the low caste were not considered worship, but *abhicharam* devil worship. The condemnation of the *avarnas* was thus ritually confirmed. And it was one such *avarna*-man who now arrogated to himself the right to install the idol of *Siva*, the *Sad-daiva moorthy*. Surprisingly, the *Savarnas* did not rise up in indignant condemnation. Not that they did not realize the enormity of the deed. One of them did question Guru about his authority to dare such a sacrilegious deed. The Guru's reply was quietly dumfounding, "We have installed only the *Ezhava Siva*". The addition of *Ezhava* was the subversive strike. It alerted the *Savarna* overlords. They were now confronting no ordinary rebel. Here was some one who questioned the foundation of all caste hierarchy. For the *Ezhava* community *Siva* has to be *Ezhava* if he is to be meaningful to them. By consecrating the *Ezhava Sivan*, Guru announced to the *Ezhavas* and all such ostracised groups the arrival of a new era of freedom, an era in which they will not allow themselves to be enslaved by any myth or indoctrination or any such alienating imposition. In Narayana Guru, the enslaved people of the *avarna* division found a champion who shattered the deep



mental bondage that held the overwhelming majority of toiling masses in absolute bondage. The earlier efforts by the Christian missionaries and the liberal philosophy of the imperialist Central Government had but peripheral and marginal impacts. It was the radical step taken by the Guru that made the liberation of the masses a reality.

This intervention by Narayana Guru led to a social upheaval which in less than fifty years, only eight years after Guru's death, culminated in the historic Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936. The *Savarna raja* of Travancore declared all government maintained temples open to all *avarnas*. In another twenty years, the people of Kerala voted to power a Marxist Government, led, ironically, by a Nampoothiri Brahmin, the apex caste in the Hindu hierarchy in Kerala. Looking back we can see how the installation of the *Ezhava Sivan* pushed the democratic process to the point where the low castes of 1888 had become the dispensers of their own destiny, the touch of Brahminism notwithstanding.

The remarkable thing about this revolutionary step taken by the Guru was that it did not provoke a violent response. Not that the Brahminic group was unconcerned. They did raise the issue of the authority of a low caste in this new dispensation. The possible inquisitorial action was stalled by the confident and challenging riposte of Guru. It silenced the would be defenders of the Orthodoxy. The challenge of an *Ezhava Sivan* was more than the caste hierarchy could handle. This challenged the overall domination of society by the caste people. In the new context, the *Ezhava Sivan* would claim the allegiance of the overwhelming majority of Indian people. He would take up the task of liberating the hitherto subdued majority. Not only were the hierarchical castes intimidated by this new formulation of religious organisation, but it posed a challenge to the subordinated groups to wake up from their millennial stupor. Under the leadership of Narayana Guru they saw themselves marching towards freedom.

### **Dismantling of Social Oppression**

The major control exercised by the caste hierarchy was effected by denying the poor masses access to the religious world of rituals and worship. Thereby their hopes were dulled and they lived in the

penumbra of the *durdevatas* and the repulsive culture of dark rituals. They had perforce to live in the subliminal and threatening sphere of the dark spirit. For the overwhelming majority this had accustomed them to a world of subhuman existence of fear and stifled creativity. The great service Narayana Guru rendered to the people under this spell was the shedding of a new light upon their life of fear and low self-estimation. He exorcised the lower castes of this spiritual darkness, by opening out to them a life of creative religious existence. The immense following he had among the people of his community and their spontaneous acceptance of his leadership to the very end of his life revealed the eagerness with which they had grasped at the hope he extended to them. This religious revolution among the oppressed castes was Narayana Guru's most significant contribution to the emergence of freedom to the captives of a caste society. Guru's impact was felt most powerfully in his own community. He was not happy with this. He wanted above all to reach out to the *dalits* whose situation was more dreadful than that of *Ezhavas*. He wanted *Ezhavas* to take a lead in the matter of freeing and empowering the *dalits*. Narayana Guru was keen that the temples of *Ezhava* community should be opened to the *dalits* also. To lead the community in the matter he took many young *dalits* into his ashram and trained them both in religious and secular learning. To challenge the caste mentality he made sure that *dalits* were given important roles in his ashrams. All the guests, no matter who they were, were served by the *dalit* boys. The food was cooked and served by the *dalits*. Guru's dearest and most respected follower was K. Ayyappan who had taken up the cause of *dalits*. His *mishra bhōjan* (meal of mixed communities) was one of the most cherished and influential historic events in the transformation of Kerala's caste ridden society. Unfortunately for Guru, his community did not endorse this cherished project of their Guru. His later withdrawal from the powerful *Ezhava* movement *Sree Narayana Dharma Paripālana Yōgam* was attributed to their refusal to integrate the *pulayas* (the out casts) with this movement. Some of the *dalit* youth trained by Narayana Guru eventually became leaders of their own community.

Narayana Guru's religious movement challenged the caste hierarchy in two ways: they had to make a rupture with the world of

caste-ridden Hinduism and renew it by forming a casteless and democratic society. He did not wait for the caste society to change. He initiated a new culture of temple worship. This was, of course, popular with the *Ezhavas*. Guru's ideas on temple worship included many revolutionary changes in the mode of worship. If he started his religious movement on a revolutionary note by installing the *Sivalinga* on a bare rock, his further innovation included installing lighted lamps, a mirror, the word *OM* etc. He did consecrate temples to the traditional *sad moorthies*. But his aim was to lead people to a worship in spirit, truth, peace, love, friendship and enlightenment. Wide open space, trees and gardens, libraries, schools, useful and edifying talks, training centres for jobs, place to spend time in silence and friendly dialogues, should form the environment of the temple. He seemed to have envisaged a time when people would lose interest in ritual worship as education and wider knowledge became accessible to the people. Even Narayana Guru seems to have under-estimated India's fascination for the temple cult?

### Religion of the Spirit

Guru's involvement with the cultic sphere was productive in keeping the *Ezhava* community together and provide them a forum for organised community action. Sree Narayana's ideas did influence the community and they found in them points of convergence and a source of inspiration. Guru's instructions soon found listening ears and the community got rid of many of the harmful and regressive habits. Above all, in him and through him, they recovered their pride of being human and daring to challenge the oppressive situations.

In Guru's mind the ultimate goal was the formation of the human community of *one kind, one religion, and one God*: one human race walking the one *path* (religion) ending in God<sup>2</sup>. He was not inclined to ritualism, but was accustomed to abiding contemplation and peace. And he believed that all religions were centred in their belief in the Divine, and that without faith it is impossible for religions to survive. The openness of Guru to all human beings, especially to those committed to the service and upliftment of the oppressed was well known. Their seeming lack of faith did not bother him. A man whose

profound religious experience led him to a total identification with the oppressed could easily find a connaturality with a man deeply selfless and self sacrificing for the weaker humans, though the person may seemingly fail to experience any sense of God or the Divine. There are some who try to attribute to Guru a profound social sense and commitment, but fail to recognise religious commitment. This is to fly in the face of facts. It is his experience of the Divine that enabled him to recognise in the poor and the rejected the reality of the Divine and moved him to embrace them in his love<sup>3</sup>.

He was too much of a prophet not to see in organised religions a tendency towards ritualistic autonomy and a vulgarization of religious experience. And he was perceptive enough how such an alienation of religion can persuade the critical minded people to give up religion. He was too far-sighted not to anticipate such an eventuality in the near future. So he was sceptical about investing more resources on temple constructions. He believed in investing resources for the growth of people, especially of their intellectual, moral and contemplative growth rather than the promotion of ritualism<sup>4</sup>.

### **Impact of a Spiritual Leader**

The religious personality of the Guru calls for special attention. He was a guru by his illumination, not by any ordination. He had taken to a way of life and activity that set him apart from the secular path. His personality was distinctly religious and he also founded a religious community, centred on prayer, study of scriptures, celibacy, community life and personal dispossession. They were to serve the community. Guru was very much at home in the company of common people as well as leaders. He was more in touch with public men than with his own disciples. There were scarcely a man of some eminence who failed to confess his respect and admiration for the Guru. These included both men of faith and agnostics. Every person who felt himself called upon to be active in the public sphere, be he a believer or not, felt the power of Guru's personality and wanted to recruit ideas or Guru's own person for his project. None could really write him off, though the Marxist theoreticians have tried to point out the need to go beyond the Guru and work for the classless society. There



are scarcely any who failed to register the significance of the Guru in Kerala. On his part he was accessible to any one who sought him. Through his admirers and disciples he worked towards the creation of the community of free, creative, other oriented, and wherever possible, contemplative men. His one great contribution to Kerala is his spiritual heir, the poet Kumaran Asan whose deep and religious humanism is still a vibrant force in the creative sphere. Nataraja Guru and Nitya Chaitanya Yathi followed this tradition in more recent times. This universal acceptability and the enduring influence he exercises on the minds of Keralites at different levels, testify to his liberative and creative significance for Kerala.

Behind his many achievements and epochal influence stands the formative force of his life: the spiritual power that moulded and guided his life. His experience of the spiritual world could only be called primordial. Gifted with a sensitive and contemplative disposition, Narayana sought silence and revealed an extra-ordinary independence of mind. His concern for the poor and the ostracised made him a constant headache for his conservative family. He was found violating with impunity the rules of untouchability. These traits in the course of time deepened into mystic contemplation and a concern for the sufferings and misfortunes of the poor outcasts and untouchables. His study of Sanskrit led him into the deep reaches of religious philosophy and yogic exercises. As he walked out of his home, he was determined to find an answer to the mysteries of life - the deep yearnings of the spirit within and the sufferings of the poor. The search came to an end as he finally came up with the revolutionary manifesto of the *Ezhava Siva*. His spiritual experience had rooted him in the mystery of life and his understanding of the human conditions of life enabled him to chalk out a path for his intervention. This combination of his immersion in the mystery of life and his commitment to the suffering masses shaped a personality which is still a "dream to the cultural world of Kerala"<sup>5</sup>

### The Advaita of Liberation

Sree Narayana considered himself an *Advaitin* after the model of Sankara<sup>6</sup>. What stands out as distinct is however his identification

with the suffering humanity and his resolve to be identified with them. In his pilgrim days he mingled with the poor of all castes and creeds. There was no caste or religious group among the poor with whom he had not lived and shared his life. Hindus, all belonging to the poor classes, Muslims and Christians, he knew well and sympathised with. These were men and women whose *souls* had been robbed. These were men and women daring in their confrontation with the forces of nature, but speechless and crestfallen when they came face to face with the caste hierarchy. He analysed the reality of this terrible fate. In the closing decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century the road to revolution had not yet been sighted. But the Guru read this debilitating deficiency as the religious conditioning of the consciousness. And his religious quest had in its driving force the painful situation of the people of the lower castes, lower even than that of his own. In his mendicant phase the Guru had had a first hand experience of this vast collection of unloved men and women. Their problem became part of his restless quest. The final illumination had been linked to his identification with and dedication to the liberation of this soulless humanity.

Narayana Guru's religious testament, the *Atmopadesa Sathakam*, expounds the process of arriving at this stage of identification with all men and women. The stage of full illumination comes when one identifies oneself with the other. The realisation of liberation arrives only when we cross the barriers of the otherness of the other. All illusion is transcended at that break through

"The happiness of the other - that is my happiness  
One's own joy is the other's joy - this is the rule;  
That action which brings happiness to one  
Should bring happiness to the other."<sup>7</sup>

This *advaitic* knowledge is the salvation of humanity. This knowledge should be embodied in one's commitment to the other.

"For the other the compassionate will labours  
Day and night unceasingly hoping for no return  
The Self-centred has time for none other, engrossed  
In his gains he paves his road to dread doom."<sup>8</sup>

For Narayana Guru, the *advaitic* experience did not mean a

withdrawal from his engagements and struggles. Rather his sense of unity with the other, the world of human beings and the rest of the creation, was a call to spend his life working compassionately for the world's well being<sup>9</sup>. His ears were close to the heart-beat of the universe. He recognised the social unrest as a call to respond to the welfare of the universal society. He followed with keen interest the social mobilisation for the societal reform. Several sensitive young men who felt the social awakening found in him a source of inspiration, warm support and wise counsel. He did not turn his back upon young men who were revolting against the obscurantism of the religious society. In their efforts to challenge and transform society they found him a tower of strength. Narayana Guru supported K. Ayyappan's heroic efforts for the social integration of the *Pulaya* community. He started the novel project of *mishra bhojanam* - the inter-communal meal - to deal a death blow to the nefarious practice of pollution taboo. Guru's open support for the movement was one reason for its popularity. And Guru urged the activists not to indulge in violence. His advice to Ayyappan was to "be patient like Christ" where patience meant action without hatred or fear. Kerala's transition from social oppression to democratic society was swift and painless, thanks to the influence of men like Sree Narayana Guru and his disciples.

Guru's activism was a blend of courage and consistent adherence to his advaitic spirituality. Anger, bitterness and reprisal were not part of his process. He stood by the principle of the unity of all beings. "Everything evolves from the one cosmic seed"<sup>10</sup>. Any kind of discrimination offended this principle of the community of being. His slogan:

"One kind, one religion, one God for human beings  
 One womb, one form, there is no difference whatever.  
 Brahmin is born of human kind  
 And so is the *paraya*? where there is the difference  
 From a *paraya* woman was the great Parāsara born  
 And the great creator of the Vedas was the son of a fisher-woman"<sup>11</sup>

## The Little Ones of God - Dalits and the Guru

The great dream of Narayana Guru was the formation of a united front of all backward classes. He took great care to promote the dalits. It was his cherished dream that the SNDP Yogam should rally the backward classes and lead their struggle for integration. The SNDP however refused to go with him. They were themselves not free from the caste complex. Sri Narayana however went ahead with the *dalit* rehabilitation and integration process. He took *dalit* boys into his ashram and trained them in various ways. He was very keen that they should play an important role in the working of the ashram. His great regard for K. Ayyappan whom he wanted to succeed him in charge of his many enterprises was based on Ayyappan's integrity in the matter of caste discrimination. His later disenchantment with SNDP had much to do with its turning it back on the *dalits* promotion. None could claim a more authentic record in this struggle for the integration of *dalits*. Against the history of continuous betrayals of *dalits* by several reformers and movements, Narayana Guru's commitment to them remains a shining witness to his great personal integrity and religious authenticity. The *dalit* question remains a standing judgement on Kerala's own claims of its humanist credentials. Narayana Guru's significance shines out against this clouded background.

## Freedom of the Spirit and Cultural Impact

Sree Narayana's stature was such that every one who claimed to be a public figure sought his approval and encouragement. It is the same with the anti-religious intellectuals and social activists. They all sensed in his personality a dimension that could not be accounted for in terms of mere social categories or ethical norms. People could only compare him with the great religious founders. And even those who rejected religion could not escape his magnetic personality. What stands out clearly in Guru's benign presence over the transformative process that changed Kerala from a 'demented horror place'<sup>12</sup> of caste extravaganza to a socially conscious democratic society. At least for a brief period Kerala became a model of development where a low per capita income could provide a quality of life that matched an income index several times higher. The impact of the Sree Narayana movement was not the least of the formative factors.



## Religion of Freedom

Sree Narayana was not a social reformer in a strict sense. His major struggle was in the world of religion. He was never in doubt about the matter. His writings are exclusively religious. They range from simple, yet most winning, of prayers, devotional hymns, moral and ascetical teachings, profound meditations on *Advaita* and two philosophico-mystical poems<sup>13</sup>. He reformed the temple worship, made use of the ritual ambience for a people friendly worship models. He was an innovator of Hindu religion in a radical way. His social reforms were linked to his religious philosophy and morality. "All are spiritually brothers-and-sisters"<sup>14</sup>.

What is known as that person, or this person,  
when carefully considered, is undifferentiated form of the Primeval  
Self.

Whatever one does for the happiness of one's own self  
should also include the happiness of others.<sup>15</sup>

Narayana Guru's religion was the most important aspect of his personality. It was both mystical and philosophical, least ritualistic. He was a Hindu in a philosophical sense, but paid little attention to the sectarian character of religion. To him his experience was vital and he did not link it with ritual practice or philosophical hardlines. His ashrams were open to all religious groups as long as they followed the basic discipline of common life and 'fraternal mentality'<sup>16</sup>. His philosophical view of religion gave him a wide canvass to accommodate the variety of religions. Conversion was called for if one came to it through search and understanding leading to conviction. He did grant its possibility and approved it on legitimate grounds.

His main conviction was that all authentic religions are equally valid. It is not possible to refute any great religion. They are all based on experience, an experience that could be communicated through instruction and yogic practices. Guru does not speak of a religious revelation in the sense of the Hebrew Christian religious experience.

## Unity of Religions and Solidarity

This experience - based religion, he believed, could surely form a common base for inter-religious co-operation. He believed that the 'essence of all religion is one-and-the-same'<sup>17</sup>. The differences among

religions could be transcended once we have tried to dialogue our way to the common foundation of all religions. "Religious founders - the *Acharyas* - have formed religions with space-time variations in order to suit the living conditions of the place and time. These religions are principally directed to the attainment of *moksha*, the ultimate liberation. These teachings are different only in small details that apply to their time and place. Just as Hinduism is a common name for the many religions of India which are not substantially different in their orientations, we could also think of *one religion* for the whole of human community<sup>18</sup>. This was an abiding conviction with the Guru and he organised a meeting of people belonging to all faiths. It was a meeting *to know and to share knowledge*. As Guru saw it, these meetings - or dialogues - of religions can pave a way to peace and creative enterprises in support of people everywhere.

In this our ecumenical age we can appreciate the prophetic nature of this initiative. While it did not lead to any further activities, it served to impress upon the people and leaders of religion the new stirrings of the spirit for the renewal of human hearts. It took another four decades for the inter-religious dialogues to be recognised as the new way of sharing the *Good News*. The following statement by J. Dupuis impress upon us how the prophetic call of Narayana Guru anticipated the Christian awareness of the Spirit's urging within the hearts of God's favourites. "A 'qualitative leap' is required in the Christian theology of religions if we wish to develop a deeper theological appreciation of the religious traditions and entertain more open and fruitful relationships with their followers. We should shun ways of 'defending the faith' which turn out to have the opposite effect, because they make faith appear restrictive and narrow. A broader outlook and more positive attitude - theologically well founded - will help Christians themselves to discover within the Christian message a new breadth and a new depth"<sup>19</sup>.

## Conclusion

God's Reign begins by 'announcing the Good News to the poor, liberty to the captives and sight to the blind'. At the turn of 18<sup>th</sup> century Narayana Guru appeared suddenly among the oppressed people of Kerala and announced a new dispensation for the *dalits*; he freed

them to claim their rights as God's children: to worship, to celebrate community, to acquire knowledge and wisdom, to work for the common good, to acquire fearlessness and skills in collaborative enterprises, to dialogue and build a noble society. He manifested a power that linked the day-to-day human activities to depths and heights that sustain and exalt the human reality. A prophet and a law-giver who lighted the way to Freedom and Dignity!

Within and without  
 Glory fill'd art Thou  
 Thy Praise We sing  
 Victory to Thee, O Lord.

In the deep ocean  
 Of thy glory let's  
 Be immersed and reign  
 And forever reign, reign.

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### Foot Notes

1. Sanu M.K. *Narayana Guru Swamy*, NBS, Kottayam, 1986, p.118-120
2. *Jatinirnayam*, 2.
3. See, Azhikode Sukumar, *Guruvinte Dukham*, Imprint Books, Quilon, p.47-49
4. Sanu M. K., *Narayana Guru Swamy*, NBS, 1986, p 181
5. P. K. Gopalakrishnan, *Narayana Guru*, NBS, Kottayam, 1979, p 123
6. *Advaitadeepika*, *Darsanamala*, 2:6
7. Narayana Guru, *Atmopadesa Sathakam*, 22
8. *Atmopadesa Sathakam*, 23.
9. *Anukampadasakam*, 3.
10. *Advaitadeepika*, 12.
11. *Jatinirnayam*, 2-5
12. A statement of Vivekananda about the casteist dehumanisation of Kerala
13. T. Bhaskaran, *The Complete Works of Sri Narayana Guru* (in Malayalam), Mathrubhumi, Calicut, 1985
14. *Jeevakarunyapanchakam*, 1. *Darsanamala*, cfr. Nitya Chaitanya Yati, *The Psychology of Darsanamala*, Gurukula, Fermhill, Ootty, 1987
15. *Atmopadesa Sathakam*, 24.
16. *Ashram*, 3.
17. *Atmopadesa Sathakam*, 44.
18. P.K.Gopalakrishnan, Op.Cit. p171
19. Quoted from an article in the Tablet, 3.11.2001, p 1560-61.

# **Iyothee Thass Pandithar:**

## **The Primordial Consciousness of Human Equality**

**A. Maria Arul Raja**

Iyothee Thass Pandithar was an intellectual and social critic of 19-20 century Tamil Nadu. In the primordial collective consciousness of the Dravidians he sensed the Buddhist values of equality and compassion. Working them out he severely criticised the brahminic hegemony that brought in estrangement and caste division among the people. Though a man of secular credentials he upheld the ethico-rational sensitivity that genuine religion can cultivate in promoting justice, righteousness and truthfulness. In them Maria Arul Raja SJ finds the values of the Reign of God. Raja teaches theology at Arulkadal Regional Theology Centre.

### **Forerunner of Dalit Self-empowerment**

Iyothee Thass Pandithar (1845-1914), a charismatic Dalit leader erudite in the realms of Tamil, Sanskrit, Pali and English literature, history, ayurveda, yoga, Siddhars and Bhakti movements, is the prominent among the forerunners of the Dalit struggle between 19th and 20th centuries in the Tamil-speaking Region. Though his biography could not be much traced to the last detail, we are fortunate to have some glimpse into his liberative orientations by way of having access to his original writings as recorded in his weekly *Tamizhan* from 1907 to 1914. They are published in the critical edition systematically compiled by G.Aloysius in two volumes (725 + 784 pages)<sup>1</sup>.



It is from these writings that his multiple roles - as brilliant intellectual, writer, social activist, native medical practitioner, educationalist, journalist, cultural watch-dog and political commentator- could be extensively appreciated in the history of Dalit self-empowerment. As an 'insider and organic intellectual among the untouchables'<sup>2</sup>, he created emancipatory ripples, especially across the northern districts of the Madras presidency, and Bangalore and Kolar districts of the Mysore State. These ripples, while energizing the battered Dalit consciousness were engaged in lobbying on their behalf, in the corridors of the British power against the scourge of casteist hegemony, manifest both in its cruel forms as well as in sweet-coated swadeshi slogans.

In this brief essay an attempt is made at constructing the liberative world-view of the Dalit self-empowerment from the writings of Pandithar. They are organized under the following headings: (1) Critical historicity, (2) Tamil Buddhism, (3) Political action for breaking casteism, (4) God and religion, (5) Attempt at a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, and (6) Determination against Determinism.

### *1.0 Critical Historicity*

Pandithar's grand father Kandappan, while serving as the butler to Lord Harrington, handed over the Tamil palm-leaf manuscripts of Tiru Kural and Naladi Nanuru to Ellis, the friend of his boss<sup>3</sup>. It is this Ellis of Madras Civil Service (1796-1819) who compiled and published many of the works of Tamil literature with commentaries during the time of the East India Company<sup>4</sup>. Even from this minimum background, Pandithar's family heritage could be somewhat constructed in terms having access to the age-old literary resources and to the patronage from the British.

In his writings, the claim of Vedic primordality and hence its superiority was challenged. The Aryan conspiracy in Brahminising the Buddhist heritage is exposed. The ways in which the present Vedic collections were made during 19th -20th centuries by the European administrators and these collections were acknowledged to be the canons of Brahminical Hinduism as well as the way in which the Buddhist heritage has been brahminised have been critically discussed

by Pandithar with perceptive historiographic frameworks. The prevalence of Buddhism across the subcontinent is historically established by him between 6<sup>th</sup> B.C and 7<sup>th</sup> A.D With his sharp historiographic arguments and linguistic evidences, he unveils Max Mueller's claim about the priority of the Upanishads (and hence of the Brahminic superiority) as baseless<sup>5</sup>. This Dalit intellectual's rigorous exegeses of the Sanskritic texts of Vedas, Upanishads, and Smritis in his writings, expose their metaphysical confusions and ethical aberrations. And hence he offers the guidelines to shy away from *asatya thanmam*, which denies the presence of the all-pervasive presence of Brahman among the Parayars and to opt for *satya thanmam* in view of attaining genuine welfare for all creatures with a sense of justice, egalitarianism, and compassion.

Even the Buddhism he professed was expected to measure up to the canons of his critical historical consciousness. "Buddha *thanmam* even if handed down by your great grand father or grand father, question it in your own enquiry and experience. If you realize its truth that it would lead to the welfare of yourself, your descendants, co-villagers and co-countrymen, then believe in it; but if found worthless in your enquiry and experience, then leave it; that is why Buddha *thanmam* is named as the true *thanmam* (*meyyaram*)<sup>6</sup>.

### ***1.1..Caste as Conspiracy Against Dravidians***

"The Dravidians"<sup>7</sup> as the original inhabitants of this land were casteless people.<sup>8</sup> "Although the original Dravidians were divided into different dynasties such as the Andhra, Karnatic, Maharashtra and Dravidian dynasties, they contracted marriage and ate together without any distinction."<sup>9</sup> The majority of the people were land tillers following the Buddha *thanmam* with mutual respect for one another, a sense of human dignity and effective compassion for all creatures. Only after the opening of the spiritual shops of the leisurely class and of the Brahmins (*veshappiramanar*), the blissful fabric of the society was disrupted into total disarray with caste discrimination and religious disharmony. It ended up as the death-knell to the prosperity of the society centred around the land tilling class of people.<sup>10</sup> The Buddha *thanmam* and Aryan *madam* (religion) are irreconcilably incompatible with each other.<sup>11</sup>

### ***1.2 Differences but not Hierarchy***

Pandithar was not against the differences in professions mutually complementary in nature for the welfare of society. Indeed he upheld the aspect of differences as universal in nature by enumerating the professional details found in the four professional divisions of the classical Sanskrit tradition as well as of the Tamil tradition (velala, vaniar, arasar, andanar).<sup>12</sup> But the hierarchy based on purity-pollution is vehemently rejected by him by way of bringing in the universality of the functions of human body, irrespective of one's colour, religion or nationality.<sup>13</sup>

### **2.0 Tamil Buddhism**

Pandithar's movement cannot just be treated as conversion of the native people to Buddhism but their rediscovery of Buddhism from the womb of their ancient Tamil soil. The phenomenon of Dalit conversion movements is often simplistically misconstrued as the floor-crossing (horizontal movement) from inhuman Hinduism to other faiths like Buddhism, Christianity or Islam. But Pandithar's historiographic sharpness undoubtedly led him to Buddhism as the bed-rock of the collective Tamil/ Dravidian consciousness (a vertical movement).

This construction of original Tamil Buddhism from deep within the substratum of collective native consciousness was seen at once as the deconstruction of the enslaving Brahminical Hinduism, parasitical in nature, ushered in by the foreign invaders -Arya-Mlechchas- with the cultural arsenals of Aryan-Sanskritic resources. This alien religion with its pernicious doctrine of varna/caste system and its associate ascriptive differentiation and hierarchy went counter to the spirit of native Dravidian legacy of rationality and equality. This native ideology is built upon the co-operating model of occupational groups complementing each other with eco- social sensibilities : for example, the five types of topographical differences with their respective occupations referred to in the ancient Tamil literature. "The religion of the oppressed is, thus, a self-conscious, self-differentiating and self-defining sacralised ideology, set against the dominant, in ethical challenge and superiority."<sup>14</sup>

By way of emphasizing the progress of the Dravidians, he does not chauvinistically rule out that of others. Rather he admonishes his own south Indians to learn from the examples of the Bombayites and Bengalis in shying away from the mythical and magical consciousness ushered in by the lazy Brahminical forces denying critical rational consciousness.<sup>15</sup> As an antidote to the ascriptive dignity operative in the system of Brahminic hierarchy, he laid emphasis on the achieved dignity on the ethical plane, which has a universal import for all the humans.

### 2.1 Criterion for True Dignity- Achievement or Attribution?

Only those with compassionate sensitivity to the sufferings of others even at the cost of their own life and luxury, will be called the higher people. They could be called *arhat*, *andhanar*, *mahajnani*, *yathartha brahmanar*. This identity is attained through achievement on the ethical plane but not through the attribution due to caste status. Degradation of the dignity of manual labour in the name of upholding attributed dignity of caste status and denial of educational opportunities to the labourers by the feigned Brahmins (*vesha piramanar*) are the evils condemned by Pandithar.<sup>16</sup> Those who persecute others with evil intentions, spirit of betrayal, avariciousness and jealousy (*vanchinam*, *poraamai*) are contagious enough to poison the merits of people. These evil ones are to be relegated as the untouchables but not the labourers. When people affected by contagious diseases are excluded as the untouchables in the name of following the existing traditions, Pandithar brings in another category that only those who have broken the caste and religious differences are said to possess ethically sound culture (*achara*)<sup>17</sup>

### 2.2 Universal Ethics

While commenting on Manu Dharma he proceeds with the general definition of Dharma as follows:

“Those humans as humans hold on to the ethics of treating humans as humans and all creatures with compassion along with their life-partners in accordance with *pancha sheela* are said to lead a life of Manu Dharma. The reason for calling it so is that it brings genuine joy and consolation to the humans at the domestic, village and national levels”.<sup>18</sup>



But the Aryan invaders from outside the country seemed to have disrupted the spirit of genuine compassion (*karuna*) with their selfishness manifested through the caste hatred and religious magic. What they called as Manu Dharma was really Manu A-dharma.<sup>19</sup>

While ridiculing the exoneration of someone who murdered his own wife for the simple reason of his being a Brahmin in the region of Tiruvananthapuram, he expressed his demand to the ruling British to break the existing draconian Hindu Law and to usher in a Common Civil Code applied to all equally.<sup>20</sup>

When the Dalits were forced to drink poisoned water, he admonished the caste Hindus vehemently. "Are not the Parayars like you ?.... you provide the animals with good water, but you kill the Dalits with contaminated water..."<sup>21</sup> "If the Dalits are not treated as co-humans by the so-called high caste people, could the latter be called humans?"<sup>22</sup> "If the caste Hindus try their best to enjoy the privileges on par with Europeans, why is there an absence of compassion in Brahmins who deny the privileges to Parayars on par with them?"<sup>23</sup>

### **3.0 Political Action to Break Casteism**

Pained at the actual denial of a dignified space both in the sacred and secular walks of life, the political movements initiated by Pandithar carried out the single-minded agenda of the abolition of casteism. For enabling this process, he tried hard in lobbying for the relevant legislations for ushering in an integral development of the sons and daughters of the soil. These aspects are dealt with in the following four sub-headings:

#### ***3.1 Denial of Dignity both in Secular and Sacred Realms***

In the beginning Pandithar was hopeful that the Indian National Congress would play an intermediary role in removing caste-disabilities by representing their tales of woes to the British administrators. And hence he forwarded a petition to the Indian National Congress in 1891 on behalf of the Dalits in view of working out effective legislation for the protection of the hapless victims and concrete programmes for their promotion in the secular spheres of

education and access to job opportunities based on minimum justice. Perceiving the regrettable absence of political will from the caste-ridden Congress (except sending the acknowledgement of the receipt of the petition), he writes it off as the Hindu National Congress buried within its own intra-Brahmin contradictions and incapable of credibly addressing the problems of casteless Dravidians and casteless Muslims.<sup>24</sup>

“Forgetful of oneself, seeking others’ welfare is the highest value (*uththamam*). Seeking one’s welfare along with that of others is the intermediary one (*madhyamam*). Seeking one’s own welfare and devastating that of others is the inferior value (*adhamam*)”. The so-called swadeshis, in Pandithar’s reading, are to be located in the *adhama* stage, because of their pretensions to be the spokes-persons for the wretched labourers of our country while negotiating with the British<sup>25</sup>

During its proceedings in April 1892 in the Victoria Hall, Madras, the Maha Jana Sabha, deliberately sidelined the ‘Parayar Problem’ from its agenda with the convenient presumption that the British were already addressing it, Pandithar insisted on the legitimate share of the ‘untouchables’ not only in the civil-political space but also in the symbolic-religious space. And while underscoring the significance of temple-entry, the upper caste uproar betrayed its true colour with its exclusivist derision: “We have given you *madurai veera sami*, *katteri sami*, *karuppanna sami*. You cannot claim ownership of our *Sivan sami* and *Vishnu sami*.”<sup>26</sup>

### 3.2 Single-minded Agenda of Caste Abolition

Against the rampant ferocity of untouchability and casteism under the hinduised society, Pandithar opted for the administrative control of British regime. The caste bias embedded in the minds of the native upper caste administrators was certainly detrimental to the welfare of the poor people. These apprehensions were concretely realized in the appointment of the locals as police officials with caste bias.<sup>27</sup>

Pandithar was highly critical of the slogans of cultural reformation as pronounced by Brahminised Saivites and Vaishnavites of the South and the Arya Samaj of the North, under the banner of the Swarajya

movement. Dismissing these slogans as merely cosmetic, he alerted the depressed class people that they could associate themselves with either of the Dalits from among (Protestant) Christians, Muslims or Buddhists to gain education, fraternity and good ethics.<sup>28</sup> Also he was quite pragmatic in instructing those employed by the British, to continue to serve them at least in view of their children's education denied in the native dispensation.

### *3.3 Legislations in Favour of the Wretched*

Perhaps, because of the upper caste denial of the legitimate space both in the sacred and secular realms to the Dalits, Pandithar was gratefully convinced that only the British and a very thin minority of the good-willed locals could help them to be emancipated from the scourge of casteist practices.<sup>29</sup> Enabling the Dalits to enter the premises of the British houses, to step into educational institutions, to take up many professions with decent costumes and dignity was all applauded by him. He strongly advocated nominating some people for the Assembly, for credibly representing the woes of these disadvantaged.<sup>30</sup> Only when the lands were within the control of the tillers, then all would profit from real prosperity. He pleaded with the British administrators for evolving legislations in favour of distributing the unused lands (*porambokku*) for the poor peasants already victimized by casteism upheld by the native administrators whose nepotism excluded the Dalits from basic rights of possession.<sup>31</sup>

### *3.4 Criteria for True Development*

Two criteria were projected by Pandithar as essential for measuring the genuine prosperity of a people. The first is the human recognition of another human as the co-human, irrespective of one's colour or language and making the other feel at home. The second criterion consisted in recognizing the contribution of the mother earth to feed all humans and making fertile even the small pieces of available land to the maximum of one's capacity in order to feed others and oneself.

This agricultural prosperity (*vivasaya viruddhi*), he hoped, paved the way for commercial prosperity (*vyapara viruddhi*) which should ensure a healthy exchange of goods with reasonable profit. On the basis of these modes of prosperity, the infra- structure for the

intellectual prosperity (*vidya viruddhi*) has to be promoted for the children and others.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4.0 Understanding of God and Religion

The fundamental characteristic of the religion of the oppressed is the ascendance of the ethical over the transcendental.<sup>33</sup> In its matrix what one observes predominantly is the emphasis on the ethically ideal world-view beyond everything else. This comes out as the natural outcome of the collective religio-human subjectivity of the people undergoing the trauma of perennial exclusion from the hands of the dominant.

According to Pandithar, those who really know God (*kadavul*) explicitates it through a sense of justice, righteousness and truth (*neethi, neri, unmei*); those who do not know God, posit on his omnipresence and omniscience. But during indulgences - like coveting the possession of others, looking on another man's wife with lust or plundering others - the same people are silent about the omnipresent and omniscient God!<sup>34</sup> Those who are incapacitated to realize their own evil deeds as 'evil deeds', will understand neither the evil deeds nor the meaning or origin of their *kadavul*. Pandithar's views on religion and God fall under the category of the ethico-rational religious sensibility wherein the ontological superiority is obviously sidelined. "The dominant classes are quite pragmatic in approaching the human beings, whereas the subalterns are pragmatic in approaching the Divine."<sup>35</sup>

Even his struggles in favour of the temple-entry for the outcasts were not coloured with the objectives of sanskritisation, but with those of regaining their denied human dignity. His readiness to accept the Brahminic denial of temple-entry for the outcasts has the hook of demanding the free schools for the Parayar children and the distribution of the land for the Parayar peasants in the remote villages. What he wants is much more of the legitimate space at the politico-economic upliftment of the Dalits rather than certain minor victory in the rat-race for the cultural superiority in the name of religious space with sanskritised symbolic world.<sup>36</sup>

The basic Buddhist doctrines of relationship between one's passionate attachment and the resultant suffering, and between the



fruit of one's action and its resultant bondage are so very well articulated by Pandithar in local idioms. But his interpretation of action (*karmam*) underscores the discerning responsibility that humans are called to practise on the ethical plane with due care and concern for the neighbour. In fact, it defies the understanding of karma as an impersonal force under whose spell the humans are forced to undergo the inevitable determinism, perhaps as the divine order.<sup>37</sup>

He was quite a rationalist in advising the people not to believe in the existence or the movements of evil spirits (*kathu, karuppu, katteri*). He also ridiculed the impotence of any brand of sacrifices offered to gods or goddesses, both under the priestly prescription and the popular practice. At the same time, he was not a ruthless iconoclast in demolishing the symbolic world altogether. While commenting on the popular festivals like *deevali, karthigai deepam, sankaranthi* or *kaman pandigai*, or discussing on the local deities like *Murugan* or *Indran*, Pandithar was at the best of his etymological sharpness tracing the roots of their agrarian foundations. This original spirit of being rooted in the soil was divested of their meaning in the eventual co-option within the symbolic world of the leisurely Brahminic priestcraft.<sup>38</sup>

Tracing the etymological meaning of *upanayana*, as *upa + nayana* (helping eye sight), he located the practices of the South Indian wandering sages (*arhats*) who were initiating others through symbolic triple threads in the rigorous process of seeking real enlightenment. It was supposed to be an initiation in getting the helping eye (third eye) for enlightenment. But he condemned the Brahmins for plundering the symbol with getting initiated into the rigorous process of seeking the third eye (*upa + nayana*) for enlightenment.<sup>39</sup> Similarly he traced how the Brahminic hegemony grabbed various other sacramental symbols from the Dravidian soil, for establishing their own superiority.

The early Buddhist monks and the Siddhars made use of natural elements, animal products, minerals and herbs and seasoned them with fire in cauldrons (*akkini kundam*) with solemn traditions (*velvith thee*) for the purposes of healing, metallurgical refinement, poisoning the weapons and even for enabling the clouds to rain. During the

performances of all these life-protecting events in total transparency, gifts of bananas, coconut pieces, beaten rice or ground nuts would be distributed to the neighbours as the mark of collective celebration. Pandithar made a scathing attack on the Brahminic hijack of these life-giving traditions into barren symbolism for the consolidation of their hegemony, by way of alienating the masses of people while pretending to do sacrifices by rattling in ancient tongues unknown to the locals.<sup>40</sup>

## 5.0 Attempt at Inter-religious Dialogue

From the writings of Pandithar with the agenda of humanizing the disadvantaged people of his times, we have certain glimpses into his attempt at a Buddhist Christian dialogue too. These are presented in the following subheadings: (1) At the Level of Social Praxis, (2) Argument against Conversion, and (3) At the Level of Religious Discourse.

### 5.1 At the Level of Social Praxis

Commending the table-fellowship organized by a group of (catholic) Christians, Pandithar

challenged the other (catholic) Christians asking if through the Brahminical practice of casteism they followed at all Christ's teaching of love of the neighbour. Even if they frequented the churches to worship Christ along with caste biases, they still remained

pagans (*a-jnanis*). Before bringing in reformation among others, he challenged them, to work out a casteless brotherhood within Catholicism.<sup>41</sup> And further, he instructed that any one who claimed himself as a Christian (*Christu+ avan*) was to be totally incorporated into the spirit of justice, love and ethics taught by Christ. If so, the caste appendage added to the Christian name is antagonistic to their identity, for the teachings of Christ and those of Manu could never be compatible with each other. Reminding the Christian priests to the saying of Christ ('Those who are exalted will be humbled and the humbled will be exalted'), he sarcastically alerted them to avoid the possibility of those Christians exalted in the name of being the high caste in this world, be humbled in the heavenly Kingdom.<sup>42</sup>

## 5.2 *Argument against Conversion*

Conversion to Christianity and Islam, as one of the Dalit attempts at encountering the antipathy of the caste Hindus is painfully and perceptively dealt with by Pandithar. Insofar as the missionary resources were well-utilized for the education of the down-trodden, he did not have any objection. But when the caste Hindus too got converted to the new religion, their very caste biases relegated the Parayar converts into the periphery of the new religion. And consequently, the caste converts stood the chances of grabbing the lion's share from missionary resources, while the Pariah converts are further discriminated against even after their conversion. When such conversion proposal was made by an Indian (Brahmin) office-bearer for the progress of Pariahs, Pandithar

expressed his scepticism in the following words: "While under this Government other communities have made progress without changing their religion you have without any difficulty made a suggestion that Pariahs alone should become either Christians or Muslims to make any progress; but I cannot see the benefits that could arise to them from your proposal."<sup>43</sup>

Pandithar admonished the attitude of the Christian missionaries that their intentions are merely for thickening the volumes of their baptismal registers and not for the genuine welfare of the people. He called it a violence.<sup>44</sup>

## 5.3 *At the Level of Religious Discourse*

Let us briefly reflect on how Pandithar prepared the common ground for a Buddhist-Christian dialogue in the course of pursuing Dalit self-empowerment.

Bidding farewell to the worldly attachments at his thirties, Buddha sought the Real (*Meipporul*) and attained Nirvana. So too, Christ in his thirty got enlightened at his baptism by John after his forty days of sojourn in the wilderness. Those who attained this wisdom in those days from *satya thanmam* were capable of living in the forests amidst wild animals. This is how John the Baptist and Samson gained mastery over the ferocious animals.

During the phase of the underground sojourn of Moses after the unintended murder of an Egyptian for the righteous cause, he could have encountered some teachings to the effect of 'Thou shalt not murder' and got enlightenment on the Sinai mountain.<sup>45</sup> In short the path shown by Moses could be summarized as: 'do not commit sin., follow the righteousness purify your hearts.' These triple commandments were the *Tripidangal* prescribed by the Primordial Scripture (*Adi vedam* or *Adi marai*). This was the path for eternal life. When this was in the form of sound, it was referred to by John's gospel as 'the Word from the Beginning'. This Righteous Word when obeyed made the life truly prosperous (Ps.1). This was amplified by Christ's Sermon on the Mount as 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.

Responding to the doctrine that 'Jesus died for our sins', Pandithar opined that one's sins could not be neutralized by another one's suffering. Rather this vicarious suffering made the sinner continue with on-going sinful tendencies. Jesus went about communicating his enlightenment realized deep within for the sake of the redemption of many with his compassion. Only as the result of these compassionate acts, he was killed by the unwise (*viveham atra*) Sadducees and Pharisees. On this count, it could be said that he died for our sins.<sup>46</sup>

## 6.0 Determination Against Determinism

"Among all the Dravidian ideologues, including Periyar who was the most popular and influential, Pandithar Iyothee Thass holds a unique position not only because of his being first on the scene but also for the elaborate, systematic, radical, and holoistic nature of his formulation."<sup>47</sup> Despite the chronological difference of half a century, the reasoning behind both Pandithar in the Tamil Parayar context and Ambedkar in the Maharashtran Mahar context in their preferred choice of Buddhism as an emancipatory religion is based on the rereading of the sub-continents' history and culture from the perspective of subalternised people.<sup>48</sup>

A social movement "is an organized attempt on part of a section of society to bring about partial or total change in society through



collective mobilization based on an ideology.”<sup>49</sup> The consciously chosen ideology of castelessness (*sath thanmam, sama thanmam*) against the dominant casteism (*varna dharma*) was interwoven into selective elements of history, myths, beliefs, lore, language and literature, to project an emancipatory identity.<sup>50</sup>

True, the great heritage of Pandithar in building up the movement for the self-empowerment of the outcastes was drowned in the collective amnesia, perhaps consciously worked out by the Brahminic hegemony down the ages. But the dynamics of excavating the casteless ethics from the bed-rock of the primordial Tamil/ Dravidian consciousness has to be energetically pursued. This could be effectively done by resurrecting the determination of this ‘Great Pandithar’ with rigorous research and relentless struggle against the evil of determinism imposed on the outcasts by the ruling hegemonic hierarchies reincarnated in various new forms in the 21st Century.

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Chennai.

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### Foot Notes

1. Iyotheethasar, Iyotheethasar Sinthanaigal-Vol I &II (ed. G. Aloysius; Palayamkottai: Folklore Resources and Research Centre, 1999).
2. Cf. Pandithar’s letter to the Dewan Bhahadur Hon. S. Srinivasa Raghava Aiyangar, Inspector General of Registration, Madras, probably written in 1894 [II/3].
3. 7:38, February 25, 1914 [I/723].
4. K.Meenakshi Sundaram, The Contribution of European Scholars of Tamil (Madras: University of Madras) 38-40.
5. Cf. “In the Coimbatore district I came across a bundle of Tamil Palm-leaf manuscripts. Among those, I found a collection of 570 stanzas styled Naradia Purana given out by a sage named Aswakosa ( Pandithar’s letter on June 8, 1898, to Colonel H. S. Olcott, Adyar, Madras).
6. 7:23, November 12, 1913 [I/496-497].
7. For Pandithar these are ‘a poor class of people who are anciently known as Dravidians but who are now called Pariahs’. Cf. His open letter to Inspector General of Registration, Madras, (probably in 1894 ) [II/3-8].

8. The standard phrase "poorviha chathiyatra Dravidarhal" occurs in numerous places in the whole of his collected works.
9. Cf. *Journal of the Mahabodhi Society*, Vol. VII/3 (1898), 23-24. (Pandithar's letter on June 8, 1898, to Colonel H. S. Olcott, Adyar, Madras).
10. 2:28, December 24, 1908 [I/124-126]; 5:44, April 10, 1912 [I/403].
11. 3:44, April 13, 1910 [II/136-137].
12. 1:4, July 10, 1907 [I/529-530].
13. 1:5, July 17, 1907 [I/531].
14. G.Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism* (New Delhi: New Age International [P] Limited, 1998) 8.
15. 6:18, October 9, 1912 [I/429-430].
16. 4:24, November 23, 1910 [I/300-302].
17. 1:6, July 24, 1907 [I/532].
18. 7:12, August 27, 1913 [II/443].
19. 7:12, August 27, 1913 [II/444].
20. "sahala kudihalukkum poduvayulla chattani"- 3:21, November 3, 1909 [I/200-201].
21. 2:38, March 3, 1909 [I/109].
22. 5:41, March 13, 1912 [I/399].
23. 7:22, November 5, 1913 [II/495].
24. 2:18, October 14, 1908 [I/75-78]; 7:22, November 5, 1913 [I/494-496].
25. 2:18, October 14, 1908 [I/69-70].
26. 2:19, October 21, 1908 [I/79-81].
27. 4:11, August 24, 1910 [I/276].
28. 4:8, August 3; 4:9 August 10, 1910 [I/270-273].
29. 3:33, January 26, 1910 [I/227-229]; 5:46, April 24, 1912 [I/405].
30. 5:41, March 20, 1912 [I/400].
31. 5:41, March 13, 1912 [I/399].
32. 6:22, November 6, 1912 [I/434-435].
33. G.Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism* (New Delhi: New Age International [P] Limited, 1998) 10.
34. 1:8, August 7, 1907 [II/28-29].
35. A.M.A. Raja, "Living through Conflicts: The Spirit of Subaltern Resurgence", *Vidyajyoti*, 65 (2001) 472.
36. Pandithar's ability to bargain with the vociferous high caste opponents against the outcast upliftment is well illustrated here. Cf. 2:19, October 21, 1908 [79-81].

37. 4:11, August 24, 1910 [II/143-145]; In the same way he comments on thalai vidhi (what is written on one's head), cf. 3:45, April 20, 1910 [II/137-138].
38. 1:21, November 6, 1907 [II/45-47]; 1:24, November 27, 1907 [II/47-51]; 1:26, December 11 [53-54]; 1:30, January 8, 1908 [II/58-60].
39. 4:9, August 10, 1910 [II/ 142-143].
40. 4:16, September 28, 1910 [II/149].
41. 3:32, January 18, 1910 [I/227].
42. 2:9, August 12, 1908 [II/99-101].
43. Cf Pandithar's open letter to Inspector General of Registration, Madras (probably in 1894) [II/8].
44. 1:8, August 7, 1907 [I/533].
45. As against the prevalent assumption of the year of Buddha's birth as 620 B.C.E., he constructed it with the help of histories of Dravidian Kings as 1486 B.C.E. (i.e., 13th of the month Vigasi (Vaisaka in Pali) in the Dravidian year Sittharththi the 1616th year of Kaliyulagu). Cf. Document published by Sakya Buddhist Society, Madras in the name of its general secretary Pandit C. Iyothee Doss on June 6, 1911 [II/180-185]. Further he rejects the tradition that Moses lived 20 centuries before Christ, for lack of reliable evidences. Against the background of the Buddhist missionary movements to Kabul, Kandahar, Afghanistan, Syria, Macedonia, Greece, Egypt even long before the birth of Christ, Pandithar surmises the spirit of Buddhist ethics would have captured the imagination of Moses, the Asian. Referring to 'eli, eli, lama sabachthani' and the presence of Elijah and Moses during the transfiguration of Christ, he is asking whether the word 'lama' in correspondence with Moses could say something in relation to his ethical learning from (Tibetan Buddhist) lama. Cf. 2:25, December 2, 1908 [I/565-566].
46. 3:38, March 2, 1910 [135-136].
47. G.Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism* (New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited, 1998) 191.
48. G.Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism* (New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited, 1998) 187. This scholar presents a host of evidences for the probable influence of the Tamil Buddhism upon Ambedkar between 1935 to 1956, in his choice of Buddhism for Dalit emancipation.
49. M.S.A. Rao (ed.), *Social Movements in India* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1984) 2.
50. G.Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism* (New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited, 1998) 178.

# Tamil Siddhas: The Divine Life-Power in the Universe

V. Clement Joseph

The Siddhas of Tamil Nadu of the 10-11 centuries have been sages endowed with special yogic powers and spiritual insights. Not adhering to any particular religious tradition or doctrinal system the Siddhas remained seekers of truth through a life of rigorous asceticism and intense meditation. Their perspectives meant a strong protest against the sectarian orthodoxy of Hinduism and the divisive ideology of the upper castes. Freedom, fellowship and justice are the central values of the teachings of the Siddhas. In them Clement Joseph CSsR finds the divine life-power that brings about the 'Reign of God.' Clement Joseph teaches philosophy in several seminaries.

The Tamil Siddha Tradition may be regarded as one of the protest movements that tried to condemn this castewise division of the Indian society. Not being atheists, nor were they agnostics, but being *pious rebels* inside the field of religion<sup>1</sup>, the Tamil Siddhas showed the way of salvation for those condemned as 'untouchables' or 'impure'.

Their service to society is beyond praise. In fact, they were the eye-openers in a world of darkness. Through their acquired wisdom and immense knowledge, they helped and continue to help all mankind to come out from darkness into light, from bondage to freedom, from sorrow to happiness and from mortality to immortality and divine beatitude. The Siddhas are true mystics - their views cosmopolitan; their teachings universal.<sup>2</sup>

In a culture and tradition that held strongly the doctrine of rebirth,



Siddha Sivavakkiyar declared: as milk, once drawn out, cannot return to the udder, nor butter back into being butter-milk, similarly the sound of the broken shell and the life of the deceased will not re-enter once again into the body<sup>3</sup>.

### Tamil Siddhas

The Tamil Siddhas are part of the both pan-Indian Siddhism<sup>4</sup>, and a peculiar offshoot of the Dravidian component that had succeeded in surviving within the Hinduism of the Tamil Country. Hence,

the Tamil Siddha movement has some additional components, which are either absent or weak in North Indian Siddhism: the religious component of anti-ritualism and anti-ceremonialism, as well as a suppression of 'devotion' (*bhakti*) in favor of the stress on ethical principles and quest for knowledge; the philosophical component which is stronger in some personalities and weaker in others, and which may be captured under three headings of 'relativism', 'pessimism' and 'disgust'; finally, a very important social component, expressed in a pronounced social radicalism and negativism, and, with some Siddhas, in anti-brahminism<sup>5</sup>.

The Tamil Siddha movement that we may now identify as distinguishable from both the pan-Indian Siddha tradition and the many autonomously independent individuals known as Siddhas

is the product of an evolution and a fruit deriving from different roots...producing what has cropped up as the *Sanmargasiddha* school in the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, and after a pause, settled down as the Tamil Siddha cult around the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>6</sup>.

In the medieval Tamil society, therefore, a unique tradition called the Tamil Siddhas emerged which had no sectarian affiliation. It did not claim to originate any new religion. The Tamil Siddhas, remaining individual yogis, were not committed to any local shrine, or deity or cult. They developed natural knowledge, which they acquired methodically through *yogic sadhana* and contemplation. The knowledge of the Tamil Siddhas probed into the fundamental problems of knowledge, being, nature and values. They propounded fundamental explanation for all things. The Tamil Siddha thought is

conventionally presented in recent studies as Siddha Medicine, Siddha Alchemy, Siddha Ethics, Siddha Cult, Siddha Magic and Religion.

### **Siddha Philosophy**

The philosophy of the Siddhas is not a system or a doctrine. Siddha philosophy is an expression of the enlightenment of the Siddhas and *a revolt against sectarian and crippling orthodoxy of religions and traditions in India*, particularly in the Tamil Land, which territorially was larger than the present Tamil Nadu. Tamil Siddha philosophy has not been adequately developed or systematically presented and critically appraised. With the available Tamil Siddha Literature, the attempts to critically construct Tamil Siddha Philosophy are very few and none of them have weathered yet the critique of the academic world sufficiently to be declared as *the* Tamil Siddha Philosophy.

However, the Tamil Siddhas had a scientific approach and methodology for their mystico-philosophical/theological endeavor. They also had for their starting point the existential phenomenon of the life of the human that is constantly juxtaposed with the necessity of death and the possibility to strive for life, i.e., eternity/divinity.

Yoga has been found as that appropriate form of self-discipline which is the steady but arduous path towards attaining freedom from the shackles of the 'conditioned embodiment' of the human into 'unconditioned', perfectly free and autonomous existence. The path of yoga that is to be pursued in order to acquire the power to be free and autonomous, while at the same time living in this mundane transient body, is called Siddhayoga. The yogic discipline of siddhayoga is not based on ordinary observation and experiment, but on yogic introspection and meditation. Siddhayoga is so formalized that it may even be identified as an independent religion: a religion of power.

Thus through a process of rigorous ascetical practice and experience, which is religious and mystical, the Siddhas have arrived at the core-message that the eternal, the beyond and the Divine is within the natural cosmic order of things, and specifically within the mortal, the 'here-and-now' and the individual human person, whoever that be, man or woman, young or old, irrespective of caste or creed<sup>7</sup>.

When the human is recognized as the realm of the Divine, the social structures and practices are to be regarded as sacred. Authentic humanity in this perspective provides the foundational doctrine for genuine freedom, imposes on every one the obligations of mutual fellowship and the setting up of a just social order. Freedom, fellowship and justice then become cardinal values of the Tamil Siddha Philosophy.

### Values of the Reign of God

The central message of Jesus is the Kingdom of God. The core-experience of Jesus from which this message derives is the *abba* experience. The values that it announces are freedom, fellowship and justice<sup>8</sup>.

When the revelation of God's love (the Kingdom) meets its appropriate response in man's trusting acceptance of this love (repentance), there begins a mighty movement of personal and societal liberation which sweeps through human history. The movement brings *freedom* inasmuch it liberates each individual from the inadequacies and obsessions that shackle him. It fosters *fellowship*, because it empowers free individuals to exercise their concern for each other in genuine community. And it leads on to *justice*, because it impels every true community to adopt the just societal structures, which alone make freedom and fellowship possible. Freedom, fellowship and justice are thus the parameters of the Kingdom's thrust towards the total liberation of man. Together they spell out the significance of the Kingdom, and tell us what the Kingdom, in practice, means today<sup>9</sup>.

This could be taken as a working summary of the *values of God's Reign enfleshed in the writings of the Gospel of Jesus*. The core-experience and the emergent central message may be regarded as specifics of Jesus of Nazareth. The values they announce go beyond the social-religious-historical context that identified Jesus of Nazareth.

It is interesting to note and quite embarrassing to realize that two millennia of the presence of the teachings of Jesus and the traditions of Christianity in India have not been able to make any recognizable

influence to eradicate the caste divide within its own Church, let alone in the Indian society.

Inter-dining is sacrilege, while inter-marriage is unheard of. No caste Christian enters the home of a harijan Christian. During marriages in the upper caste settlements, harijans are given food outside the house served in little wicker baskets. Caste Christians never attend weddings in the *cheri*. Marriage or funeral processions of harijans are banned from passing through 'upper caste' streets<sup>10</sup>.

Says Fr. Anthony Raj: 'They divide men into the pure and the impure. They subordinate the impure to the pure and they reduce the impure to mere scum of our society. If this is not immoral, my Christian sensibilities do not permit me to call adultery as sinful or immoral'<sup>11</sup>. This legitimate anger is akin to divine displeasure of the Siddhas. One is reminded of the vision of Peter before the acceptance of the household of Cornelius into the Christian fold. "What God has cleansed, you must not call impure."<sup>12</sup>

The 'reign of God' concept is not found in the writings of the Tamil Siddhas. Hence that is not the central message. However, the core-experience of the Tamil Siddhas is the accessibility of the Divine through Siddhayoga. Their central message is the availability of the Life-Power of God within the human in each one's life. The values that they strove to propagate are: authentic freedom for self-reliance, intentional equality that is existential, and the impelling establishment of a just human order. Thus the secular issues of adopting just societal structures to promote human fellowship for everyone to enjoy and live genuine freedom are found to be sacred because the 'life-power' of the Divine is an inseparable, though distinguishable, component of the human.

### **Faith: Life-Power of God within the Human**

From the most elementary to the most developed, the history of religions 'is constituted by a number of important hierophanies, manifestations of sacred realities'<sup>13</sup>. The great mystery is that the sacred or the Divine is made manifest within the 'natural' or the 'profane' world. The wonder of the manifestation or the 'hierophany'



is that “the sacred limits and ‘historicises’ itself”<sup>14</sup>. Experiences of the Divine have been the motivational force for the numerous shrines and temples of prayer and worship all over the world. Traditions of rituals and their foundational beliefs make up different religions.

The Tamil Siddhas concede to the reality of the Divine and the process of heirophanies. They however are against any imposition of doctrine and rituals, which distances people from the Divine and introduces intermediaries. In contrast, the Siddhas declare that the Divine is within the human. What is the meaning of laying flowers around a ‘planted stone’ (meaning a holy altar, perhaps the ‘sivalinga’ or the ‘hero-stone’) and to go around it, muttering prayers? Will the *stone* answer prayers when the God you worship and pray to is within you?

Regarded as god, the erected stone is adorned with four flowers  
Going around it, what does the devotee mutter?

Will the stone respond, when the Lord is within?

The pan, the ladle: will they know the taste of food<sup>15</sup>?

As the sweet water finds its way into the tender coconut, so does the Divine enter and enshrine itself within me.

As the sweet juice finds its way into the tender coconut

The Lord comes, enters and makes a temple within

Once the Lord has come, entered and made a temple within

It’s not I that opens the mouth amidst the people of the world.<sup>16</sup>

The Divine that is within is identified as ‘light’. Instead of finding it within oneself, crores of people have gone far and wide in search of it.

In continuous and wearisome search for the indwelling light  
crores and crores of people spend sleepless nights  
and die in vain without finding

the indwelling light that is within everyone.<sup>17</sup>

Siddha Sivavakkiyar goes further to declare that “Om Namacivayame” can be found within oneself when “Om Namacivayame” has been fully understood and assimilated<sup>18</sup>.

Through a process of elimination and reduction, Sivavakkiyar discovers the double-edged fire brand in the sacred formula *Civayavaci*, which we postulate as the "human-divine continuum" of Sivavakkiyar's theological anthropology<sup>19</sup>.

Thus, it may be pointed out that for the Tamil Siddhas, the primary and core-experience is *the Divine-within*. Being 'caught' by the Divine-within, the Siddha appropriates to himself the Life and the Power of God. It is this possibility that is proclaimed for everyone. How foolish the vain are who search hither and thither for the Dynamic One! Search rather within yourself and if you are capable of perceiving you would then discover that the 'not-able-to-blend-together' has not mingled with each other.

Searching here and there for the Dancing Lord  
How foolish are the vain who need to search within -  
Strive with care to perceive within self  
The blend of the Unattainable Absolute.<sup>20</sup>

## Freedom

The gripping and the over-powering experience of *the Divine-within* empowers the Siddha and all those who are willing to submit to such an experience to be the 'enlightened', or the 'liberated', or simply 'free' persons. They are freed from the enslaving traditions, beliefs and customs of the religions and cultures that segregate one from the other and makes some 'pure' and others 'impure.'

Among women which is untouchable and which is touchable  
Is there a mark of distinction on the flesh, skin and bone?  
Is the pleasure with the untouchable woman different from that  
with the touchable  
Analyze self and there find the untouchable and the touchable  
within<sup>21</sup>.

Those are not free to find themselves as authentic persons with *the Divine-within* who make and maintain themselves as Brahmin and the 'untouchables'. They bind themselves into such divisive and dehumanizing categories. The Brahmins continue to perpetrate the

system and the 'untouchables' accept it as divine imposition. This lack of freedom is the curse of society. What has touched the mouth is taken as defiled because of the spittle, which is considered to be dirty.

When water passes through the mouth it is spittle, you say  
 When the mouth mutters "slokas," is it to be the "Vedas"?  
 To cleanse the mouth of spittle, you prescribe drinking of water  
 Explain plainly how the spittle is removed from the mouth  
 Reciting Vedas is impure; all invocations are impure;  
 All preaching is impure; the seven worlds are impure;  
 Sperm in the womb is impure; mind is impure; sound is impure;  
 That which is not impure is not - is not - is not

How was it before birth?

How will it be after death?

Explain with clarity, ignorant ones

Or else, with five-lettered sword I shall sever your ears<sup>22</sup>.

One needs to be freed from the religion, culture and rituals that are based on erroneous thinking and teaching.

The Four Vedas believed in and the accepted customs  
 Theories of the elements and all the scriptures  
 Violence of caste anomalies and the rationalizing literature  
 All are full of errors from their very inception.<sup>23</sup>

The *Divine-within* in its authentic freedom is drawn towards communion with the universe of the Beyond of Beyond, which alone is God all else are artifacts.

God made of wood - god made of stone  
 God made of bark - god made of saffron  
 God made of cloth - god made of (cow)dung  
 None of them is god except the Beyond.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, temples and springs (water spots for ritual cleansing) are within the human person and not in any particular location belonging to any tradition of religionists.

Which is temple? Which are (holy) water-fonts

Temple is in the mind! Water-fonts are in the mind!<sup>25</sup>

Thus, angered by the enslaving and dehumanizing religious practices, segregations and societal structures, the Tamil Siddhas were verily iconoclastic in proposing counter cultural revolution. Their theology was one of 'Immanence of the Transcendent' and their message was 'freedom of the children of the Beyond.'

### Fellowship

In so far as alternative-reformative theology is concerned, we could talk of Tamil Siddhas. But when it comes to fellowship that includes countering 'gender bias,' it is only some, like Sivavakkiyar, who have vehemently declared the equality of sexes and fellowship that is more fundamental. Many of the Tamil Siddhas have spoken from within the male-dominated societal presumptions. In fact a few have even been against women in their writings. Hence, we have been drawn towards the comprehensiveness of Sivavakkiyar Thought.

The *Divine-within the human* does not make any distinction between the male and the female of the human species. By the very fact of their being, men and women are equally *divine-within humans*. Siddha Sivavakkiyar's line of thinking is that the *to-be-born* watery substance in the womb of the mother is neither male or female until a definitive gender orientation is physiologically taken, which today science affirms as taking place sometime after the 10<sup>th</sup> and around the 12<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy.

Woman and man are the same before they are born.

In the days of the growth of the indistinguishable watery embryo.<sup>26</sup> The Siddha further argues that when the ultimate goal is reached through yoga, it is Life and Power, which is neither male nor female but "civayame."

Self takes flight through the energy centers in yogic striving

Neither woman nor man but the Breath of Life is born

The body becomes pure whether renounced or exalted

Civayam is made manifest at the moment of Death (Samathi).<sup>27</sup>



When such is the propagation of truth and reality regarding equality among the humans, then can one not recognize the dynamic force of fellowship that is being propounded by the Siddhas? The 'divine displeasure' and legitimate anger of righteousness are against all forms of divisiveness among the sections of society, be it based on caste, creed or even gender.

## Justice

The dimension of *Divine within the human* makes every individual share the Life-Power of God. Empowered with the sacred characteristics, all are equal and obliged to uphold mutual fellowship, failing which the 'divine' enshrined within oneself is defiled when the 'divine' enshrined in the other is not revered. Thus fellowship is intrinsic to being human, rather than some ethical imperative. Human fellowship is itself Holy Communion. 'Human-in-the-social' thus becomes sacred.

In this ontological reflection and perhaps mystical aspiration, the 'human-in-the social' is a laboring being. People labor for everything. The common folks strive and struggle for sustenance; the better off ones struggle for amassing wealth and power. The pressures of daily chores, with a lack of transcendent vision, blur the significance of death and its consequences. Lustful cravings and passionate pursuits are also blindfolds that blur the transcendent vision.

While the needed material goods are to be sought after and the phenomena of sex and its propensities are to be conceded to arrogant affluence and lustful passions cannot be condoned. Either way the 'Divine within the human' is defiled by the 'human in the social' due to lack of appropriate orientation of the 'human intention'. With appropriate ascetic discipline, i.e., yoga, the Life-Power of the Divine within would be enabled to surge and emerge into its own proper orientation. Thus 'human intention' would render the labour of the human fruitful. In other words, freedom and fellowship now enables just ordering of societal structures where individuals would be revered and their legitimate needs would be met.

When the 'Divine within' is transgressed, sin is committed. The sinner estranges him/herself from the Being of the Beyond of the

Beyond (if that be possible!), and is regarded as one who is dead already, that is without grace or honor.

Truly, there is no god with sinners who have no morals

Even when there is woman and wealth, if there is no grace

Emptiness without god and abysmal hell is the lot.<sup>28</sup>

*Karam* and *Porul* may refer to life and sustenance; they may also refer to women and wealth. Accordingly, one may be considered as rich in oneself: *ad intra* or rich in relation to others and wealth: *ad extra*. The unrighteous may possess *karam* and *porul ad indra* or *ad extra*, but due to lack of proper orientation, i.e., lack of genuine human intention, they are nobody and nowhere, i.e., they are in the torments of hell. One is reminded of the parables of Lazarus and the Rich Man, the Rich Fool and the Prodigal Son<sup>29</sup> The transcendent vision of the enlightened one who is genuinely free because of the Divine within and who recognizes the Holy Communion of human fellowship is empowered to labour intentionally to provide, promote and protect just societal structures for righteous living. Thus the faith, in the core-message of the Siddhas, is found to propagate the basic values of freedom, fellowship and justice. The socio-religious and historical context of the Siddhas was one of enslaving religious traditions and divisive cultural practices, including dehumanizing caste and gender bias. The authentic 'intentional' human anger of the Siddhas was the divine displeasure which promoted the alternative transcendent vision of the new human and a new social order akin to the new heaven and new earth of the New Testament, not for the 'hereafter' but for the 'here-and-now'.

## Conclusion

The perception of the Siddhas leads us to recognise the "God within" and "God-with" dimensions of human existence. This incarnational perception of divine presence may be regarded as the Siddhas' comprehension of the never abandoning immanent operation of the accompanying God who not simply intervenes periodically for the sake of solace and comfort in times of suffering and pain but rather is present more dynamically as the inner light and force that empowers the individual. In other words, the Immanent Dynamics of



the Divine within the human facilitates the orientation of the Life of the human towards transcendence. There is no social milieu, which is the ultimate that crushes and dehumanizes the victims of oppression, and injustices with no way out at all. On the contrary, the Immanent Transcendence dimension of the Divine in the human empowers and enables every human individual to take up the here-and-now social situation and to transform it into a social milieu which befits the conditions of the Reign of God. Thus, equality, justice, the Immanent Transcendent Divine, and the empowered orientation towards transcendence in the here-and-now social milieu are vital insights of Siddha theology and anthropology. So are they the values of the Reign of God in the New Testament dispensation.

The Dalits, the tribals, the fisher-people, the women, the most backward castes, minorities and the unorganized youth, perhaps the misguided wretched of the land, the *abandoned* of society, become the “chosen ‘race’, ‘tribes of Yahweh’, the ‘poor’ who “thirst” for freedom, fellowship and justice. In situations when there is neither morals nor grace (*aram ilatha, arulilatha pothu*), the Siddhas provide us with greater clarity of their reality, an ideology to sustain us in our work, and a spirituality to carry forward the struggle.

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### Foot Notes

1. See T.N.Ganapathy, *The Philosophy of the Tamil Siddhas*. New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1993, p.17.
2. P.Raja, “Tamil Siddhas” *Journal of the Institute of Asian, Studies*. VI/2 Mar.1989, 146.
3. Sivavakkiyar, 46:1-2. All references are made to *Cittar Jnanak Kovai yena vazhangum Cittar Padalgal*. Ed. Aru. Ramanathan, Chennai: Prema Pirasuram. Vols.2. 1959. 7<sup>th</sup> Print : 1990. The translations of Siddha Songs are free rendering in English from Tamil by the author.
4. The pan-Indian Siddhism includes the North Indian Tantric Siddha Yoga: the quest of perfect health and immortality in this life, and hence a preoccupation

- with medicine and alchemy; the basic Hatha Yoga techniques; and the development of occult powers, the *ashtama siddhis*. Kamil V. Zvelebil, *The Poets of the Powers*. London: Rider&Company Ltd., 1973. p.29
5. Kamil V. Zvelebil, *op.cit.*, pp.29-30.
  6. R.Venkataraman, *A History of the Tamil Siddha Cult*. Madurai: Ennes Publication, 1990. p.29
  7. Sivavakkiyar, 25,33,38,157.
  8. See George Soares-Prabhu, *The Kingdom of God Jesus' Vision of a New Society* (A Paper prepared for the Research Seminar on 'The Indian Church in the Struggle for a New Society', organized by and held at NBCLC, Bangalre, 19-24 October, 1981), Bangalore: NBCLC, 1981.
  9. *Ibid.*, p.25
  10. K.P. Sunil, "Children of a Lesser God" *The illustrated Weekly of India*. June 25, 1989,39.
  11. Cited by K.P. Sunil, *ibid.*
  12. Acts of the Apostles, 10:15.
  13. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries. The Encounter Between Contemporary Faith and Archaic Reality*. Trans. Philip Mairet. Glasgow: Harvill Press, 1960, p.124. In this section Mircea Eliade analyses the concept of "The Holy" as propounded by Rudolf Otto in 1917 through Otto's little book entitled *Das Heilige*.
  14. Mircea Eliade, *op.cit.*p.125
  15. Sivavakkiyar, 496
  16. Sivavakkiyar, 31, 157.
  17. Sivavakkiyar, 3.
  18. Sivavakkiyar, 106
  19. For a detailed discussion of Sivavakkiyar's "word-project" see the unpublished doctoral dissertation of V. Clement Joseph, titled *The Human-Divine Continuum. Anthropology According to Sivavakkiyar*. Chennai: Department of Christian Studies, 1997, pp.175-203
  20. Sivavakkiyar, 400
  21. Sivavakkiyar, 38.
  22. Sivavakkiyar, 39, 40, 41.
  23. Sivavakkiyar, 461
  24. Sivavakkiyar, 510. See Sivavakkiyar, 35: "Civan" is recognized not in images made of bricks, granite or of any metals. Rather, the 'Lord of the Universe would dance and sing within' when self-discipline (yoga) leads to self-realization (enlightenment, liberation, or freedom in authentic self-affirmation).
  25. Sivavakkiyar, 33:1,3.
  26. Sivavakkiyar, 25:2-3
  27. Sivavakkiyar, 357.
  28. Sivavakkiyar, 504, 2-4.
  29. Gospel of Luke, 12: 16-21;15: 11-24; 16:19-31